

# BJCT

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### Queering Critical Theory: Re-visiting the Early Frankfurt School on Homosexuality and Critique

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# Queering Critical Theory: Re-visiting the Early Frankfurt School on Homosexuality and Critique<sup>1</sup>

Bruce Baum<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** That the Frankfurt School theorists' ignored the homosexual emancipation movement in Germany prior to 1933 is revealing given their commitment to critique "what is prevalent" and their concern with the relationship between critical theory and political practice. Horkheimer and Adorno's recurring diagnostic approach to "homosexuality" epitomizes how the spectre of fascism shaped the development of Critical Theory; and it provides a case study that offers three concrete lessons for rethinking the methods and promise of Critical Theory. First, it illuminates how Critical Theory can address the entwinement of norms of gender and sexuality with conceptions of the nation, citizenship, and racialized and class divisions. In particular, their analysis of "homosexuality" foreshadows, although in a problematic way, recent queer theory critiques of homonormativity and homonationalism. Second, the shortcomings of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis highlight the importance of queering Critical Theory, encompassing an intersectional approach to different axes of power and social identity. Third, this case study lends support, with some amendments, to two proposals that Axel Honneth has advanced to reorient Critical Theory for our time: his call for reconstructive criticism with a "genealogical proviso"; and his insistence that Critical Theory analyze "the social causes responsible for systemic violation of conditions of recognition."

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- 1 Previous versions of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association, April, 2017, in Vancouver, British Columbia, and at the annual Critical Theory Roundtable, at UC Irvine, November 3-5, 2017. I want to thank Amy Allen, Kevin Amidon, Alexander Held, Nojang Khatami, Steven Klein, Antonin Lacelle-Webster, Spencer McKay, Minelle Mahtani, Renisa Mawani, Nimu Njoya, Chris Patterson, Corey Snelgrove, and participants at the WPSA conference and Critical Theory Roundtable for helpful comments on my earlier efforts.
  - 2 Bruce Baum is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, BC, Canada). His publications include *Rereading Power and Freedom in J.S. Mill* (2000); *The Rise and Fall of the Caucasian Race: A Political History of Racial Identity* (2006); and *The Post-Liberal Imagination: Political Scenes from the American Cultural Landscape* (2016).

In an early formulation of the project of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, Max Horkheimer declares, “The real social function of philosophy lies in its criticism of what is prevalent.”<sup>3</sup> The objective is “to prevent mankind from losing itself in those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instills into its members.”<sup>4</sup> Critical Theory thus has sought to unveil the reification, or false naturalization, of oppressive but changeable social and political relationships and institutions.<sup>5</sup> Working within the Marxist tradition in the wake of the defeat of Germany in the First World War and the failed German revolution of 1918-19, Horkheimer and his colleague Theodor Adorno initially focused on class domination and reification under capitalism. Then, confronting the rise of National Socialism and exile to the United States, they pushed the boundaries of Marxism to tackle changes in twentieth century capitalist societies, including fascistic tendencies, and group dynamics of “social discrimination” and “religious and racial hatreds.”<sup>6</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno’s Marxism has led many current critically oriented social and political theorists to pursue alternative forms of critical theory to address multiple, intersecting axes of oppression and injustice. One manifest shortcoming of their Critical Theory concerns how they

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- 3 Max Horkheimer, “The Social Function of Philosophy,” in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 264. I reserve “Critical Theory” for thinkers in the Frankfurt School tradition to distinguish them from a now wider array of modes of critical theorizing. See Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
  - 4 Horkheimer, “Social Function of Philosophy,” 264-65.
  - 5 Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; Martin Jay, “Introduction,” in Honneth, *Reification*, 3-11; Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
  - 6 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr; trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1947] 2002), 172; Max Horkheimer, “Preface,” in T. W. Adorno et. al., *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1950, ix; Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, [1951] 2005), 10.

addressed “homosexuality,” which reveals limitations of their fusion of Marxism and psychoanalysis.<sup>7</sup> Although Horkheimer and Adorno never analyzed homosexuality in detail, they discussed it in several writings. Adorno eventually supported decriminalization of homosexuality, but – as previous commentators have noted – most of his and Horkheimer’s thoughts about it echoed the then prevailing view of homosexuality as a pathology.<sup>8</sup>

This was so even as the Critical Theorists’ Institute for Social Research was established in Frankfurt, Germany in 1923-24, during the Weimar Republic, when Germany was the site of a conspicuous homosexual emancipation movement – the world’s first – as well as nascent National Socialism. The rise of National Socialism spurred them to analyze the social roots of anti-Semitism. Yet, neither the homosexual liberation movement nor the Nazis’ persecution of homosexuals led them to scrutinize prevailing conceptions of “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality.” Instead, Horkheimer and Adorno employed a problematic psychoanalytic notion of “repressed” homosexuality to diagnose politically the psychodynamics of Nazism; and they posited “the homosexual” as the archetypal repressed subject.<sup>9</sup>

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7 For now I will retain the terms “homosexual” and “homosexuality” due to their historical salience for these thinkers. Later I address the problems with these terms.

8 Michael Warner, “Introduction,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), vii-xxxi; Randall Halle, “Between Marxism and Psychoanalysis: Antifascism and Antihomosexuality in the Frankfurt School,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 29, no. 4 (1995), 295-317; Randall Halle, *Queer Social Philosophy* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Andrew Hewitt, *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism, and the Modernist Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Kevin S. Amidon, “What Happens to Countess Geschwitz? Revisiting Homosexuality in Horkheimer and Adorno,” *New York Journal of Sociology* 1 (2008), 1-24; Alison Moore, “Sadean nature and reasoned morality in Adorno/Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” *Psychology & Sexuality* 1, no. 3 (2010), 250-61.

9 Theodor W. Adorno, “Freudian theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” in Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 136, 154 n. 7. The Freudian Marx-

That the Frankfurt School theorists' ignored the homosexual emancipation movement in Germany prior to 1933 is revealing given their commitment to critique "what is prevalent" and their concern with the relationship between critical theory and political practice.<sup>10</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno's diagnostic approach to "homosexuality" epitomizes how "the spectre of fascism" shaped the development of Critical Theory.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, their approach becomes more comprehensible once we consider how the interplay of nationalism, gender, and sexuality informed conflicting visions of homosexual liberation in Weimar Germany. One branch of the German homosexual liberation movement challenged gender binaries and supported democratic, socialist, and feminist values; a second, "masculinist" branch foreshadowed features of Nazism: it promoted male associations (*Männerbund*) and included ultranationalist, anti-Semitic, misogynist, and National Socialist propensities.<sup>12</sup> Previous scholars have noted that the Frankfurt School theorists ignored the homosexual emancipation movement.<sup>13</sup> But they have not examined the significance of the masculinists and homosociality for the Critical Theorists' account of homosexuality and fascism.<sup>14</sup>

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ist thinker Wilhelm Reich, among others, similarly linked fascism to sexual repression. See Halle, *Queer Social Philosophy*, 136-39, 157-67; Eli Zaretsky, "Adorno's Contributions to Mass Psychology and Why They Matter," in *A Companion to Adorno*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Max Pensky (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 327.

10 Horkheimer, "Social Function of Philosophy," 264.

11 Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West* (London: Verso, 2018), 16; Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, ch. 5; Jonathon Catlin, "The Frankfurt School on antisemitism, authoritarianism, and right-wing radicalism," *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 7, no. 2 (2020), 198-214, DOI: 10.1080/23254823.2020.1742018.

12 Harry Oosterhuis, "Homosexual Emancipation in Germany Before 1933: Two Traditions," *Journal of Homosexuality* 22, nos. 1-2 (1991); Claudia Bruns, "The Politics of Eros: The German *Männerbund* between Anti-Feminism and Anti-Semitism in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Masculinity, Senses, Spirit*, ed. Katherine Faull (Bucknell University Press, 2011), 102-25.

13 Hewitt, *Political Inversions*, 38-78; Halle, *Queer Social Philosophy*, 141; Amidon, "What Happens to Countess Geschwitz?," 12-13.

14 Jack Halberstam examines the relationship between the German homophile



The Critical Theorists' ideas about homosexuality thus provide a case study with which to reconsider Nancy Fraser's question, "What's critical about Critical Theory?"<sup>15</sup> This is so, moreover, in a manner that speaks to – while inverting – Michael Hames-García's related question, "Can queer theory be critical social theory, negating domination, affirming and articulating liberatory alternatives, and participating in a critique of society as a whole?"<sup>16</sup> My question is this: In what ways can Critical Theory contribute to queer theory, address intersecting axes of injustice, and, thus, contribute to a critique of society as a whole? My answer is that it would be a mistake to conclude, with Michael Warner, that classical Critical Theory is "useless or worse" for this task because its concepts and methods "embed a heteronormative understanding of society."<sup>17</sup>

This point might be most obvious with respect to the work of Herbert Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno's Frankfurt School colleague. Within

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masculinists, homosociality, and Nazism but without considering the Frankfurt School theorists. See Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 147-71.

- 15 Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 113-43.
- 16 Michael Hames-García, "Can Queer Theory Be Critical Theory?," in *New Critical Theory: Essays on Liberation*, ed. William Wilkerson and Jeffrey Paris (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 204.
- 17 Warner, "Introduction," xi. My analysis complements the efforts of scholars working at the interface between Critical Theory and queer theory. See Hames-García, "Can Queer Theory Be Critical Theory?"; Jennifer Rycenga, "Queerly Amiss: Sexuality and the Logic of Adorno's Dialectics," in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, ed. Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002); Marcel Stoetzler, "Adorno, Non-Identity, Sexuality," in *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*, ed. Sergio Tischler, Fernando Matamoros, and John Holloway (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 151-88; Floyd, *Reification of Desire*; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Heather Love, "Queer Critique, Queer Refusal," *Radical Philosophy Review* 16, no. 2 (2013): 443-457; Amy Villarejo, "Adorno by the Pool or, Television Then and Now," *Social Text* 127 (June 2016): 71-87; Rochelle Duford, "Daughters of the Enlightenment: Reconstructing Adorno on Gender and Feminist Praxis," *Hypatia* 32, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 784-800; Roderick A. Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer* (Cambridge, UK and Melford, MA: Polity, 2019).

the Frankfurt School, Marcuse was most dedicated to seeking a place for sexual pleasure that might counter the economic and conformist imperatives that bound sexuality narrowly to the reproduction of labor and consumerism.<sup>18</sup> In his book *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Marcuse heralded the emancipatory promise of “a reactivation of all erotogenic zones and, consequently, ... a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality”; and he discerned resistance to “repressive civilization” in “perversions” such as homosexuality.<sup>19</sup> Yet, while Marcuse’s ideas about sexuality – aside from his labeling homosexuality a “perversion” – have been generative to later critical and queer theorists, such as Heather Love and Kevin Floyd, the insights and blindspots of Adorno and Horkheimer’s discussions of “homosexuality” are particularly instructive for my purposes: they returned to the topic several times and over a nearly twenty-year period; and these discussions were part of otherwise astute analyses of repression, emancipatory critique, and authoritarianism.<sup>20</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of “homosexuality,” I contend, offers not only a lesson in how conceptual blind spots can be found even among radical critics of existing ideologies and institutions, as they themselves recognized.<sup>21</sup> This case study also offers three concrete lessons for rethinking the methods and promise of Critical Theory. First, it illuminates how Critical Theory can address the entwinement of norms of gender and sexuality with conceptions of the nation, citizenship, and racial-

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18 See Herbert Marcuse, “On Hedonism,” in Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 185-92; Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1955] 1966), 201-37.

19 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 201, 203.

20 Floyd and Love provide compelling assessments of what Marcuse’s thought can offer queer theory as a form of critical theory. See Floyd, *Reification of Desire*, ch. 3; Love, “Queer Critique, Queer Refusal.”

21 Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 207; Theodor W. Adorno, “Sexual Taboos and Law Today,” in Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford; introduction by Lydia Goehr (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 71; Amidon, “What Happens to Countess Geschwitz?,” 7, 19-20.

ized and class divisions. It highlights enduring aspects of Horkheimer and Adorno's account of critique, reification, authoritarianism, and repression that prefigure de-naturalizing propensities of queer theory and other contemporary critical theories.<sup>22</sup> In particular, Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of "homosexuality" foreshadows, although in a problematic way, recent queer theory critiques of exclusionary practices of *homonormativity* and *homonationalism*.<sup>23</sup> Second, the shortcomings of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis highlight the importance of *queering* Critical Theory, including the need for Critical Theory to incorporate an intersectional approach to different axes of social power and social identity.<sup>24</sup> This move is needed to sustain Horkheimer's pledge that Critical

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22 Floyd, *Reification of Desire*; C. Heike Schotten, "Nietzsche and Emancipatory Politics: Queer Theory as Anti-Morality," *Critical Sociology* 45, no. 2 (2019) 213–226; Elena Gambino, "'A More Thorough Resistance'? Coalition, Critique, and the Intersectional Promise of Queer Theory," *Political Theory* 48, no. 2 (2020): 218–244. Rycenga observes that Adorno's dialectical thinking failed to remain consistently dialectical when he considered "homosexuality" (Rycenga, "Queerly Amiss").

23 Jasbir Puar, "To be gay and racist is no anomaly," *The Guardian* June 2, 2010, at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jun/02/gay-lesbian-is-lamophobia> (November 25, 2020); Jasbir Puar, "Rethinking Homonationalism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013), 336–39; Nikita Dhawan, "Homonationalism and state-phobia: The postcolonial predicament of queering modernities," in *Queering Paradigms V: Queering Narratives of Modernity*, ed. María Amelia Viteri and Manuela Lavinás Picq, with Marcelo Aguirre and Ana María Garzón (Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2016), 51–68; C. Heike Schotten, "Homonationalism: From Critique to Diagnosis, or, We Are All Homonational Now," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18, no. 3 (2016), 351–370, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2015.1103061.

24 Anita Fischer and Daniela Tepe, "'What's Critical about Critical Theory': Feminist Materialism, Intersectionality and the Social Totality of the Frankfurt School," in *Critical International Political Economy: Dialogue, Debate and Dissensus*, ed. Stuart Shields, Ian Bruff, and Huw Macartney (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 132–48; Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), ch. 2; Gambino, "'A More Thorough Resistance'?" While queer theory and intersectional analysis are distinct, queer theory has been infused by intersectional insights from the start. See Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction," *differences* 3, no. 2 (1991), iii–xviii; Annamarie Jagose, "The

Theory must “be aroused ever anew by prevailing injustice.”<sup>25</sup> Third, this case study also lends support, with some amendments, two proposals that Axel Honneth has advanced to reorient Critical Theory for our time: his call for reconstructive criticism with a “genealogical proviso”; and his insistence that in place of a narrow focus on class domination Critical Theory should analyze “the social causes responsible for systemic violation of conditions of recognition.”<sup>26</sup>

In section I, I discuss the German homosexual liberation movement, which crested in the decade that the Frankfurt School was established. In section II, I explore the de-naturalizing aspect of their Critical Theory. Sections III and IV summarize Horkheimer’s political sociology of sexual morality, authority, and the family and the heteronormative aspects of his and Adorno’s views. This examination is itself genealogical: it exposes how Critical Theorists employed “erudite knowledge” to buttress the prevailing regime of sexuality.<sup>27</sup> In section V, I sketch three lessons for Critical Theory that emerge from my analysis.

### I. Homosexual liberation and Fascism in German Before 1933

When the Frankfurt School was established in the 1920s, there were convergences between the burgeoning homosexual emancipation struggle and the nascent National Socialism movement concerning nationalism, modes of masculinity, and male bonding, or what we now call *homosociality*.<sup>28</sup> Historian George Mosse notes that in the period of emerging na-

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Trouble with Antinormativity,” *differences* 26, no. 1 (2015), 28-29.

25 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 241.

26 Axel Honneth, “Reconstructive Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso,” in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, trans. James Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 44; Axel Honneth, “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect,” in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), 72.

27 Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the College de France*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fantana (New York: Picador, 2003), 8.

28 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*; Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson, “Homosociality: In Between Power and Intimacy,” *SAGE Open* (January-March 2014), 1-2; Andrew Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families: Homosexu-*

tionism, industrialization, shifting gender norms, and political turmoil in Germany from the early nineteenth century to the Weimar era, “[t]he ideal of manliness was basic ... to the national ideology. Manliness was invoked to safeguard the existing order against the perils of modernity.”<sup>29</sup>

The lawyer Karl Ulrichs initiated the homosexual liberation movement in the 1860s with a series of pamphlets in defense of “all *Urnings* [male homosexuals] who suffered under the prejudice and persecution of a *Dioning* [heterosexual] majority.”<sup>30</sup> The term “homosexuality” (*Homosexualität*) was coined in Germany in 1869 in a pamphlet that challenged Prussia’s anti-sodomy law.<sup>31</sup> The first organization to advocate for rights of “homosexuals,” the Scientific Humanitarian Committee (*Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* [WhK]), founded in Berlin in 1897, sought to abolish Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code, “which punished with a prison term so-called ‘vice against nature.’”<sup>32</sup> Its key figure the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935) was Jewish, socialist, and anti-racist. In the WhK’s “Petition to the Reichstag” in 1897 to repeal Paragraph 175, Hirschfeld wrote that scientific research on homosexuality “has confirmed that this way of love ... has occurred at all times, all over the world.”<sup>33</sup>

Between 1918 and 1933, the movement included proliferating organizations, cultural activities, and activism, with groups that promoted “homosexual bourgeois respectability” and lesbian activism.<sup>34</sup> By 1924

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*ality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2015), 92-3.

29 George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 23.

30 Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Vintage, 2015), 18.

31 Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, xii; Robert Deam Tobin, *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 14-17.

32 Oosterhuis, “Homosexual Emancipation in Germany,” 1.

33 Scientific Humanitarian Committee, “Petition to the Reichstag” (1897), in *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, ed. Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan (New York: Routledge, 1997), 135.

34 Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 222-34.

the petition campaign to repeal Paragraph 175 had garnered substantial support from prominent professionals and public figures.<sup>35</sup> Hirschfeld's scientific approach to homosexual liberation, however, had an equivocal impact. Clayton Whisnant observes that it had "a 'queering' effect in the cultural and social environment in which he lived" insofar as Hirschfeld highlighted the wide array of sexual orientations and combinations of sex, gender and desire.<sup>36</sup> Yet Hirschfeld's classification of sexualities reinforced medicalized views that construed "homosexuality" as "pathology."<sup>37</sup> And his support for gender and sexual non-conformity conflicted with widespread beliefs about the "respectable manliness" deemed necessary for national well-being.

Hirschfeld's approach to "homosexuality" was opposed by other prominent male writers and activists who sought to demonstrate manliness.<sup>38</sup> Many embraced an "image of the hypermasculine warrior who spearheaded a new German society."<sup>39</sup> In 1903, a second homosexual liberation group formed, the Society of Self-Owners, led by Adolph Brand. This group promoted a masculinist, anarchist, free love orientation infused with nationalism, racism, and misogyny.<sup>40</sup> Brand and the biologist Benedict Friedlander appealed to ancient Greek models of male bonding and intimate friendship.<sup>41</sup> Friedlander and other masculinists resisted the

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35 Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 224.

36 Clayton J. Whisnant, Review of Elena Mancini, *Magnus Hirschfeld and the Quest for Sexual Freedom: A History of the First International Sexual Freedom Movement* (2010), *The German Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (Fall 2011), 523.

37 Ralf Dose, *Magnus Hirschfeld: The Origins of the Gay Liberation Movement*, trans. Edward H. Willis (New York: Monthly review, 2014), 73-75; Kirsten Leng, "Magnus Hirschfeld's Meanings: Analysing Biography and the Politics of Representation," *German History* 35, no. 1 (March 2017), 111-12.

38 Gerta Hekma, Harry Oosterhuis, and James Steakley, "Leftist Sexual Politics and Homosexuality: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Homosexuality* 29, nos. 2-3 (1995), 20; Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 34.

39 Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 34.

40 Oosterhuis, "Homosexual Emancipation in Germany."

41 Harry Oosterhuis, "Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no.2 (April 1997), 197.

label “homosexual” and tended to think in terms of “a generalized bisexuality, at least among men.”<sup>42</sup> By the 1920s, while homophobia remained widespread in Germany, many German homosexuals took up nationalist ideas and participated in anti-homosexual parties and institutions.<sup>43</sup> In 1926, a survey of 50,000 members of the Human Rights League, a moderate homosexual rights organization, found that “over 30 percent of the respondents with party affiliations were extreme-right nationalists.”<sup>44</sup>

Another influential masculinist, the best-selling author Hans Blüher, was an anti-Semite who welcomed National Socialism. His theories of the Männerbund (male association) movement, which was widely discussed in Germany in the early twentieth century and exemplified the homosociality common to the masculinists, had clear affinities to Nazism.<sup>45</sup> During the First World War Blüher promoted the Männerbund as the basis for a hierarchically organized state. He later conceived the Männerbund in opposition to Jews, who came to epitomize “all that was not manly, German, and spiritual.”<sup>46</sup> Heinrich Himmler, who later became the Nazi’s SS Chief, hailed Blüher’s ideas in his diary on March 4, 1922: “The man has penetrated human erotics to a colossal degree.... It is clear that there must be a masculine society. I doubt whether one can characterize it as erotic.”<sup>47</sup> By 1930, Nazi ideologue Alfred Baeumler considered strengthening the Männerbund “a central political aim of future politics.”<sup>48</sup> The Nazis adapted Baeumler’s notion of “Führer-follower relations” in organizations modelled on the *Männerbund* principle; these

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42 Tobin, *Peripheral Desires*, 66, 74-82.

43 Manfred Herzer, “Communists, Social Democrats, and the Homosexual Movement in the Weimar Republic,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 29, nos. 2-3 (1995), 208-9.

44 Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 236, 231-34.

45 Claudia Bruns, “‘How gay is Germany?’: Homosexuality, politics, and racism in historical perspective,” in *National Politics and Sexuality in Transregional Perspective: The Homophobic Argument*, ed. Achim Rohde, Christina von Braun, and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (London: Routledge, 2017), 92.

46 Bruns, “Politics of Eros,” 105, 111-12.

47 Himmler, quoted in Tobin, *Peripheral Desires*, 81-82.

48 Bruns, “Politics of Eros,” 114.

included the *Pimpfen* (Little Folk), the *Hitler Youth*, the SA (stormtroopers), and “elite groups such as the *Black Knights*, and the SS.”<sup>49</sup>

Himmler and Ernst Röhm, who led the SA between 1931 and 1934, embodied the continuities and incongruities between militant masculinity, homosexuality, and Nazism. Röhm was homosexual and represented “the community of fighting men” who had defended the German nation in WWI.<sup>50</sup> He became a focal point for contradictory positions of the German left and the Nazis concerning homosexuality. Before 1933, the left supported repeal of Paragraph 175 of the penal code. Yet it perpetuated negative stereotypes of homosexuality, which it often associated with Nazism.<sup>51</sup> In 1932, in the midst of public controversy surrounding Röhm’s homosexuality, the Social Democratic daily *Vorwärts* warned that the leadership of the SA and Hitler Youth threatened the “healthy sensibility of the people.”<sup>52</sup> The Nazis used such terminology to condemn homosexuality. In June 1934, when Hitler came to regard Röhm as a threat, he denounced the SA as a wellspring of homosexuality to justify a violent purge of Röhm and other SA leaders.<sup>53</sup> By 1937, Himmler became troubled by the homosocial character of the Nazi movement. He worried that the National Socialist state was threatened internally because organizations like the SS and Hitler Youth could become hotbeds for homosexuality. Under Himmler’s leadership the Nazis intensified persecution of homosexuals.<sup>54</sup>

## II. Horkheimer and Adorno’s de-naturalizing critique

The Critical Theorists fled Germany with the Nazis’ rise to power. In exile in the 1930s and 1940s, they developed a critical analysis of anti-Sem-

49 Bruns, “Politics of Eros,” 115.

50 Clayton J. Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 206.

51 Harry Oosterhuis, “The ‘Jews’ of the Antifascist Left: Homosexuality and Socialist Resistance to Nazism,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 29, nos. 2-3 (1995), 228.

52 Quoted in Oosterhuis, “The ‘Jews’ of the Antifascist Left,” 231.

53 Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany*, 208.

54 Oosterhuis, “Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany,” 201; Oosterhuis, “The ‘Jews’ of the Antifascist Left,” 234-37.



itism.<sup>55</sup> Although they ignored the German homosexual emancipation movement, Magnus Hirschfeld's work on homosexuality was known to but disapproved by the German psychiatrist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, who had links to the Frankfurt Critical Theorists.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, Adorno critiqued the Wandervögel movement, a band of nature-hiking youth that Hans Blüher chronicled, which was part of the Männerbund movement.<sup>57</sup> In an essay on the music of Gustav Mahler, in 1936, Adorno contrasted Mahler's humanism with the Wandervögel's proto-fascistic aesthetic and conformist social "bonding" tendencies:

Is it not striking that those who can expound so much on the new 'bonds' of music to the collective and to usefulness refuse to extend their placet to Mahler's music.... Mahler remains the single exemplary composer who, in reality, stands outside of the space of aesthetic autonomy and, moreover, whose music could truly be used by living people and not merely by conforming *Wandervögel*. Might not those admirers of bonds be more concerned with bonds as such than with the contents for which the collective is mobilized? Are not contents that are more than the fetishized bond itself fundamentally suspect to them?<sup>58</sup>

As I explain later, Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of homosexuality reads as though it was provoked by the dangers posed by German masculinists of the Weimar and Nazi eras.

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55 Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, chs. 1-2.

56 Klaus Hoffmann, "Frieda Fromm-Reichmann – Her Years in Germany 1889-1933," *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 7, no. 2 (1998), 85-97, DOI: 10.1080/080370698436169. Fromm-Reichmann was married to Erich Fromm, an early member of the Institute for Social Research. She also had personal connections with Critical Theorists Horkheimer and Leo Lowenthal; and she was member of the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute, founded in 1929, which obtained offices in Institute for Social Research. See Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 54; Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*, 87-88.

57 Tim Pursell, "Queer Eyes and Wagnerian Guys: Homoeroticism in the Art of the Third Reich," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 1 (January 2008), 134-35; Tobin, *Peripheral Desires*, 57-79.

58 Theodor W. Adorno, "Marginalia on Mahler," (1936), *Telos*, no. 87 (Spring 1991), 83.

Horkheimer, outlining their project in “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937), explains that “the critical attitude ... is wholly distrustful of the rules of conduct with which society as presently constituted provides each of its members.”<sup>59</sup> While Horkheimer and Adorno focused on social pathologies of capitalist society, their critical analysis intimates a broader critique of the reification of “the rules of conduct” that society prescribes for its members.<sup>60</sup> Horkheimer links a “crisis of science” to the inability of the present form of society “to make effective use” of its powers to address “the real needs of mankind.”<sup>61</sup> But he and Adorno go further to critique objectifying conceptual thinking that reifies economic, social, and cultural practices.<sup>62</sup> The detachment of science from “problems connected with the social process” perpetuates “a set of unexplicated, rigid, and fetishistic concepts..., when the real need is to ... relat[e] them to the dynamic movement of events.”<sup>63</sup> In the study of society there is a dialectical relationship between theorist and object of study, “knowledge and action.”<sup>64</sup> This demands a “consciously critical attitude” whereby “the critique of the existing order and the struggle against it along lines determined by the theory itself ... is part of the development of society”:

Here we do have forces and counterforces. Both elements ... are interconnected and are based on the experienced effort of man to emancipate himself from coercion by nature and from those forms of social life and of the juridical, political, and cultural orders which have become a straitjacket for him.<sup>65</sup>

The social conditions that Horkheimer envisions concern “an economy filled with contradictions.”<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, if we reconceptualize

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59 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 207.

60 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 207, 213-18.

61 Max Horkheimer, “Notes on Science and the Crisis,” in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 4.

62 Theodor W. Adorno, “Idea of Natural History,” *Telos*, no. 60 (June 1984), 111.

63 Horkheimer, “Notes on Science,” 5-6.

64 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 230.

65 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 229-30.

66 Horkheimer, “Notes on Science,” 8.

“dynamic relationships” and “internal tensions” of society to include struggles concerning such things as racism, gender, colonialism, sexuality, and disability along with tensions specific to capitalism, we find a multifaceted interplay of social power and knowledge production.<sup>67</sup> The Germany homosexual emancipation movement instigated a dialectic of “forces and counterforces,” contesting received ideas about what is “natural” and “normal” in human sexuality.

Horkheimer contends, moreover, that “theoretical content must be constantly and ‘radically questioned,’ and the thinker must be constantly beginning anew.”<sup>68</sup> Core features of Critical Theory will remain relatively stable “until there has been a historical transformation of society” that upends its class-divided economic structure.<sup>69</sup> That said, “The historical development of the conflicts in which the critical theory is involved leads to a reassignment of degrees of relative importance to individual elements of the theory.”<sup>70</sup> Critical Theory will “be aroused ever anew by prevailing injustice, but [social transformation] must be ... guided by the theory itself and in turn react upon the theory.”<sup>71</sup> For theory to be *critical*, it must address “decisive problems of existence,” and scrutinize “those human relations and modes of reaction which have become so deeply rooted that they seem natural, immutable, and eternal.”<sup>72</sup>

These ideas are fruitful for a critical theory of gender and sexuality. Horkheimer and Adorno sometimes included love, sexuality, and family relationships among the “decisive problems of existence.” Yet, usually they failed to subject these matters to thorough critical analysis. Adorno exemplifies this tendency in his critique of Aldous Huxley’s understanding of love and sexuality in *Brave New World*. Adorno analyzes the efforts of Huxley’s heroine, Lenina, who has been conditioned to enact the

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67 Horkheimer, “Notes on Science,” 5-8.

68 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 234.

69 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 234.

70 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 234.

71 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 241.

72 Horkheimer, “Social Function of Philosophy,” 257.

“sexual disposition of all over all,” to seduce John the Savage, who loves her.<sup>73</sup> Reflecting on Lenina’s “artificial charm,” Adorno says that because she is so thoroughly conventional, “the tension between the conventional and natural dissolves, and with it the violence in which the injustice of convention consists.”<sup>74</sup> Huxley “construes humanity and reification as rigid opposites”; he “forgets that humanity includes reification as well as its opposite, not merely as a condition from which liberation is possible but also positively, as the form in which ... subjective impulses are realized, but only by being objectified.”<sup>75</sup>

Adorno does not extend his analysis to prevailing ideas about (“normal”) heterosexuality and (“abnormal”) homosexuality, however. He might have regarded prevailing sexual conventions as necessary reifications, but that would raise the question of where and when, if ever, such reifications are *necessary*. Instead, he presents his usual view of repressed homosexuality as neurotic (see sec. IV, below). He notes that John admonishes Lenina because he regards her uninhibited sexuality as “a debasement of his sublime passion for her.”<sup>76</sup> Adorno comments that John’s outburst was “the aggression of the neurotic who, as Freud ... could easily have told [Huxley], is motivated in his frantic purity by repressed homosexuality.”<sup>77</sup>

Responding to Huxley’s ideas about sexual pleasure, Adorno critiques the hedonistic pursuit of “pleasure” in repressive societies as symptomatic of an inability to distinguish between “true and false needs.”<sup>78</sup> Huxley recognized “that in a society where sexual taboos have lost their intrinsic force ... pleasure itself degenerates to the misery of ‘fun’...[and] sex

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73 Theodor W. Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” in Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), 105.

74 Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” 105-6.

75 Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” 106.

76 Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” 105.

77 Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” 106.

78 Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” 109.

becomes a matter of indifference.”<sup>79</sup> Adorno does not reject pleasure *per se* but rebukes Huxley for presuming that “by demonstrating the worthlessness of subjective happiness according to the criteria of traditional culture he has shown that happiness as such is worthless.”<sup>80</sup>

Adorno further indicates how Critical Theory could critique prevailing ideas about gender and sexuality in “The Idea of Natural-History” (1932). He adopts Georg Lukács’s understanding of how the cultural “world of convention” constitutes a “second nature” for human beings.<sup>81</sup> Adorno insists that “second nature” is “like the first [nature.] ... nature in the sense of the natural sciences,” to underscore “the interweaving of historical and natural being” in human existence.<sup>82</sup> Nature and history “break apart and interweave” such that “the natural appears as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign for nature.”<sup>83</sup> Human history is always conditioned by our interactions with nature and the *nature* we encounter is itself partly a historical product.<sup>84</sup> Thus, in his “Theses on Need” (1942), Adorno maintains, “Each and every drive is so socially mediated that its natural moment never appears immediately, but always only as produced through society. The appeal to nature in relation to this or that need is always merely the mask of frustration and domination.”<sup>85</sup> This line of analysis would seem to challenge naturalized understandings of human sexuality, but Adorno and Horkheimer do not take this step.<sup>86</sup>

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79 Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” 103.

80 Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia,” 111. See also Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 71, 82.

81 Adorno, “Idea of Natural History,” 111.

82 Adorno, “Idea of Natural History,” 118.

83 Adorno, “Idea of Natural History,” 121.

84 The salience of this point has become clear in our era of anthropogenic climate change and the sixth extinction. See Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

85 Theodor Adorno, “Theses on Need” (1942), in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Toward a New Manifesto* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), 82.

86 That said, Duford traces how Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, explores “the unnaturalness of sex/gender assignment”; and Joseph Litvak discerns some

### III. Horkheimer on authority, the family, and sexuality

Horkheimer employs such insights, however, in his account of shifting norms regarding authority, the family, and sexuality. His analysis presumes the normative correctness of heterosexual gender and sexuality. Yet, it suggests a deeper critique and sheds light on how gay, queer, and transgender liberation struggles have resonated in liberal democratic capitalist societies since the late 1960s (see sec. V, below). Horkheimer observes that capitalist development generated transformations in marriage, love, and sexuality: “The emergence and dissemination of cultural values cannot be separated from” the class division in the economy, particularly “the subordination of the masses at work and ... in life generally.”<sup>87</sup> Societal regulation of sexuality has been “economically conditioned ... within the framework of marital union and family.”<sup>88</sup> This social regulation has not destroyed romantic love, however, “which can drive the

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“queer” moments in Adorno’s critical reflections. See Duford, “Daughters of the Enlightenment,” 794-96; Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 132-41. The recently published correspondence between Adorno and his early mentor Siegfried Kracauer, which indicates an erotic aspect of start of their relationship, sheds new light on the “queer” moments in Adorno’s thought. In an early letter to Adorno dated April 5, 1923, when Adorno was age 19 and Kracauer age 34, Kraucauer described his “agonizing love for” Adorno. In an letter to Kracauer before he began his relationship with Gretel Karplus (who Adorno later married), Adorno wrote, “I no longer believe that I have any ability left at all to feel love for a woman” (quoted in Stuart Jeffries, “Human Spanner,” *London Review of Books*, June 17, 2012, at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n12/stuart-jeffries/human-spanner>). With reference to the German edition of their correspondence, Johannes von Moltke comments that Kracauer’s letter “sets up a utopian horizon of love – whether romantic, platonic, sexual, and/or intellectual – that inevitably affects the reading of all subsequent exchanges; undoubtedly, it also affected their writing.” See Johannes von Moltke, “Teddie and Friedel: Theodor W. Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, and the Erotics of Friendship,” *Criticism* 51, no. 4 (Fall 2009), 685.

87 Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality” (1933), *Telos*, no. 69 (Fall 1986), 109; Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 53-54.

88 Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family,” 58.

individual into opposition to or even a break with society. The historically conditioned and not originally 'natural' linking of sexuality and tenderness ... can be generated ever anew by suitable cultural habits."<sup>89</sup> Horkheimer notes historical changes in "monogamous marriage" but regards the heterosexual aspect of marriage as fixed.<sup>90</sup>

In "Materialism and Morality" (1933), Horkheimer observes that "socially functional reactions [are] consolidated in customs" differently in different societies.<sup>91</sup> He calls for reciprocal love in place of ideas about marriage that rationalize using one's spouse nonreciprocally for sexual gratification: "Unless the aim of a future happy life for all men [i.e., people] ... is included in the description of this love, it proves impossible to define. Love wishes the free development of the creative powers of all human beings as such."<sup>92</sup> Rather than rejecting "bourgeois" ideals "of Freedom, Equality, and Justice," Horkheimer envisages their "realization" with the transformation of the present society: "The dialectical critique of the world ... consists precisely in the demonstration that [these ideals] have retained their actuality rather than lost it on the basis of reality."<sup>93</sup> Horkheimer does not extend this point to the struggles of homosexuals for an equal freedom to pursue love and sexual pleasure, but German homosexual liberationists advanced such claims.

One further contribution of Horkheimer and Adorno's historical sociology of authority and the family concerns how they link individual psychology to "objective social forces" and homosexuality to authoritarianism.<sup>94</sup> Despite their influential study of "the authoritarian personali-

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89 Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 58-59.

90 Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 126; Horkheimer, "The Future of Marriage," in Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (London: Verso, [1974] 2012), 84.

91 Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 102.

92 Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 105-6.

93 Horkheimer, "Materialism and Morality," 108.

94 Theodor W. Adorno, "Remarks on 'The Authoritarian Personality' by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford" (1948), reprinted in *Platypus Review*, no. 91 (November 2016), <https://platypus1917.org/2016/11/08/>

ty," they insist, Adorno writes, that "fascism as such is *not* a psychological issue...; rather, fascism defines a psychological area which can be successfully exploited by the forces which promote it for entirely non-psychological reasons of self-interest."<sup>95</sup> They underscore "unconscious" social conditions that foster self-defeating authoritarian allegiances among "the masses": "These psychological conditions are themselves products of modern developments, such as the disintegration of medium property, the growing impossibility of an economically independent existence, the change in the structure of the family, the false goals of the economy."<sup>96</sup> Adorno explains, "People are inevitably as irrational as the world in which they live."<sup>97</sup> The "economic irrationality" and forms of domination that characterize capitalist societies undermine family relationships and impair people's psyches.<sup>98</sup> At this nexus of capitalism, authority, and the family, Horkheimer and Adorno discern "a deep-rooted affinity between homosexuality, authoritarianism, and the present decay of the family."<sup>99</sup>

#### IV. Horkheimer and Adorno on "homosexuality"

Horkheimer and Adorno's approach to "homosexuality" combines conceptual deficiencies with social-psychological insight. While there is no clear evidence that they pondered the German homosexual emancipation movement, they would likely have known of the unsuccessful parliamentary effort in 1929 to abolish Paragraph 175 of the German Crim-

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remarks-authoritarian-personality-adorno-frenkel-brunswick-levinson-sanford/.

95 Adorno, "Freudian theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," 135.

96 Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, *Aspects of sociology*, trans. John Viertel; preface by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (London: Heinemann Educational Book, [1956] 1973), 170.

97 Adorno, "Remarks on 'The Authoritarian Personality.'"

98 Adorno, "Remarks on 'The Authoritarian Personality.'"

99 Max Horkheimer, "Authoritarianism and the Family," in *The Family: Its Function and Destiny*, ed., Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 394.



inal Code (to decriminalize homosexuality); and they would likely have known of the controversy and violence involving the Nazi SA leader Ernst Röhm a few years later (see sec. I). Furthermore, as they analyzed Nazi anti-Semitism, Horkheimer and Adorno responded to the fascistic homosociality in Germany that Adorno had observed in Wandervögel movement in 1936 (see sec. II). Significantly, though, the term “homosociality,” which might have lent greater nuance to their analysis, was not yet available to them.<sup>100</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno ignored the research of German homosexual emancipation advocates, like Hirschfeld, concerning the lives of actual homosexuals and other gender non-conforming people.<sup>101</sup> They addressed the topic diagnostically to expose the psychodynamics of Nazi political culture. Horkheimer and Adorno present their theory in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) where initially they link fascist behavior to sadistic *heterosexuality*. Reprising their argument that in fascist and capitalist societies the pursuit of sexual pleasure “becomes an object of manipulation,” they endorse the idea that “[w]ith both the male and the female ... ‘love’, or sexual attraction, is originally and preeminently ‘sadistic’; it is positively gratified by the infliction of pain.”<sup>102</sup> Marquis de Sade prefigured a fascistic ethic in sexual intimacy, celebrating strength and rejecting pity as a concession of the strong to the weak.<sup>103</sup>

When Horkheimer and Adorno address fascism more directly in their chapter on anti-Semitism, they link it to *repressed homosexuality*, which they associated with outwardly heterosexual men.<sup>104</sup> They sought to

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100 Halle, *Queer Social Philosophy*, 148. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick popularized the term “homosociality” in 1985, although it was coined a little earlier. See Hammarén and Johansson, “Homosociality,” 1-2.

101 Amidon, “What Happens to Countess Geschwitz?,” 12-13. Similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno’s colleague Herbert Marcuse, as Floyd says, “is ultimately more interested in utopian, speculative figures of perversion than he is in real perverts,” or in “mere real-life homosexual subjects.” See Floyd, *Reification of Desire*, 139, 144.

102 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 83-84, 89.

103 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 88-89.

104 Martin Dannecker, “Die kritische Theorie und ihr Konzept der Homosex-

explain why non-Jewish German workers, a subordinated class under capitalism, rallied behind National Socialism. Nazi anti-Semitism, they contend, gave German workers symbolic empowerment and an outlet for their frustrations: they resorted to “false projection” to distance themselves from Jews, “brand[ing] the intimate friend as foe.”<sup>105</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno associate a similar process of *pathic projection* with repressed homosexuals. It involves “the transference of socially tabooed impulses from the subject to the object as the substance of that projection”:

The proscribed material converted into aggression is usually homosexual in nature. ... The sick subject regresses to an archaic confusion between love and dominance. ... Because it cannot acknowledge desire within itself, it assails the other with jealousy or persecution, as the repressed sodomite hounds the animal as hunter.<sup>106</sup>

Targets of pathic projection are indeterminate: “whatever it hits on fits its purpose; the delusion of relatedness strikes out unrelatingly. Pathic projection is a desperate exertion by an ego which ... has a far weaker resistance to internal than to external stimuli.”<sup>107</sup> Their generalization that such aggression of the “sick subject” is “usually homosexual” echoed the then widespread belief that homosexuality is a neurosis.<sup>108</sup> Their deeper point, however, concerns the *repressed subject*, with the “repressed homosexual” misidentified as its archetype. Repression generates a “desperate exertion” by which the repressed subject transfers his, her, or their aggression onto vulnerable others.

Adorno reiterates this idea in *Minima Moralia* (1951) in a section titled (in English) “*Tough baby*.” He detects

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ualität: Antwort auf Randall Halle,” *Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung* 10, no. 1 (1997), 23.

105 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 143, 154. I explore this topic more fully in Bruce Baum, “Decolonizing Critical Theory,” *Constellations* 22 (September 2015): 420–434.

106 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 158–59.

107 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 159.

108 This view was commonplace among the European left. See Hekma, Oosterhuis, and Steakley, “Leftist Sexual Politics and Homosexuality,” 13–15.

a certain gesture of virility ... that calls for suspicion. ... He-men are thus, in their own constitution, what film-plots usually present them to be, masochists. At the root of their sadism is a lie, and only as liars do they truly become sadists, agents of repression. This lie, however, is nothing other than repressed homosexuality presenting itself as the only approved form of heterosexuality.<sup>109</sup>

After mentioning two types of students at Oxford, “tough guys” and intellectuals, with the latter often lumped with “those who are effeminate,” Adorno remarks, “In the end the tough guys are the truly effeminate ones, who need the weaklings as their victims in order not to admit that they are like them. Totalitarianism and homosexuality belong together. In its downfall the subject negates everything which is not of its own kind.”<sup>110</sup>

Elsewhere, Adorno and Horkheimer complicate their linkage between repressed homosexuality and fascism. In “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” Adorno says that Hitler “was well aware of the libidinal source of mass formation through surrender when he attributed specifically female, passive features to the participants of his meetings, and thus also hinted at the role of unconscious homosexuality in mass psychology.”<sup>111</sup> In a footnote, Adorno qualifies his reference to “unconscious” homosexuality citing Freud’s claim “that homosexual love is ... compatible with group ties, even when it takes the shape of uninhibited sexual tendencies.”<sup>112</sup> He explains, “This was certainly borne out under German fascism where the borderline between overt and repressed homosexuality, just as that between overt and repressed sadism, was much more fluent than in liberal middle-class society.”<sup>113</sup> Adorno’s contention about a

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109 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 45-46.

110 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 46. Adorno considers “pathic projection” and “false projection” common tendencies in a “repressive society” (*Minima Moralia*, 105).

111 Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” 122.

112 Sigmund Freud, quoted in Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” 177-78 n. 7.

113 Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” 178 n. 7.

greater fluency between overt and repressed homosexuality and sadism in German fascism than in liberal society is confounded by Nazi persecution of homosexuals after 1934.<sup>114</sup> Yet, aside from the undue weight that Adorno places on “repressed homosexuality,” his observation illuminates the blurred boundaries between Weimar era Männerbund and masculinist homophile movements and Nazi homosociality.<sup>115</sup>

Reverberations of the Weimar era proto-fascist masculinist homophiles and National Socialist homosociality also shadow the connection that Horkheimer makes between homosexuality and authoritarianism in his post-war essay “Authoritarianism and the Family.” Focusing on men and boys, the fascist attitudes Horkheimer finds among “today’s middle classes” mirrors then pervasive images of manliness in the United States as well as earlier ideas of the German masculinist homophiles.<sup>116</sup> Horkheimer says that despite the mother’s “official exaltation,” the boy regards her “because of her sex [as] something weak and contemptible ... and looks upon her as a member of an inferior race.”<sup>117</sup> He links such maternal relations to “[t]oughness, ruthlessness, and the forced display of masculinity, all leading to politico-fascist ideologies” in “the subsequent rejection of everything that is deemed ‘different.’ Out-groups rejected by fascists, particularly the Jews, are often fancied as showing traits of femininity.”<sup>118</sup> Horkheimer then links homosexuality with authoritarianism, but in a way that more clearly links defensive masculinity and repressed homosexuality to misogyny and homophobia:

Contempt for the traits of the opposite sex in one’s own sex seems to be regularly connected with a highly generalized intolerance of what is different. This result suggests a deep-rooted affinity between homosexuality, authoritarianism, and the

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114 Geoffrey J. Giles, “The Denial of Homosexuality: Same-Sex Incidents in Himmler’s SS and Police,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1-2 (January-April 2002), 256-290; Halle, *Queer Social Philosophy*, 139.

115 Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families*, chs. 2-3.

116 Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family,” 391-93.

117 Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family,” 393.

118 Horkheimer, “Authoritarianism and the Family,” 393.

present decay of the family. The strict dichotomy between masculinity and femininity and the taboo of any psychological transitions from one to the other correspond to an over-all tendency to think in dichotomies and stereotypes.<sup>119</sup>

Shortcomings of Horkheimer and Adorno's thinking about homosexuality remained when Adorno revisited the issue in "Sexual Taboos and Law Today" in 1963, when sexual morality was debated vigorously in Germany.<sup>120</sup> Yet Adorno cautions, "Even critical thought risks becoming infected by what it criticizes," "especially" true regarding "enlightenment about sexual taboos."<sup>121</sup> With reference to female sexuality and prostitution, he says that sexual repression has not disappeared. Instead, "a new, deeper, form of repression has been reached, ... [and] the actual spiciness of sex, continues to be detested by society."<sup>122</sup>

Nonetheless, even as he rebukes the repression of "otherness" Adorno remains ambivalent about homosexuality.<sup>123</sup> Reiterating the notion of "pathic projection," he contends that those who feel repressed "attempt to transfer [their repression] onto other, weaker groups, and either rationally or irrationally perpetuate the odium. ... The taboos can be reawakened because social suffering ... is repressed and displaced onto sexuality."<sup>124</sup> He continues to name repressed homosexuals among those who project their burdens "onto weaker groups": "Of all the nefarious effects of the shady and unacknowledged sexual oppression this is the worst. It is especially striking in that type of homosexual whose admiration of

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119 Horkheimer, "Authoritarianism and the Family," 394.

120 Dagmar Herzog, "Sexuality, Memory, Morality," *History & Memory* 17, nos. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2005), 238-266.

121 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," 71. Elsewhere, Adorno criticizes psychoanalyst Karen Horney for "speak[ing] of [the] sexually normal person as if it is a self-evident ideal." See T. W. Adorno, "Revisionist Psychoanalysis" (1946), trans. by Nan-Nan Lee, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 40, no. 3 (2014), 331.

122 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," 73.

123 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," 76-77.

124 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," 79, 77.

virility is coupled with an enthusiasm for order and discipline."<sup>125</sup>

Yet, Adorno not only condemns ongoing legal repression of homosexuals. He also notes an "often overlooked aspect of the ostracism of homosexuals": where ongoing legal repression of homosexuals "is justified with the explanation that it will not be applied." Adorno comments, "Even if homosexuals were finally left more or less in peace, the atmosphere of persistent legal discrimination would necessarily subject them to unremitting anxiety."<sup>126</sup> That is, laws against homosexuality, even when unenforced, subject homosexual persons to social disrespect. In the end, Adorno stumbles near a proper response to fascistic pathic projection even as he continues to construe homosexuality as a neurosis: "If one accepts the psychoanalytical theory that claims that homosexuality in many cases is neurotic, ... the social and legal pressure, even if indirectly, will perpetuate and reinforce the neurosis according to the psychological law of anaclisis."<sup>127</sup> The real problem is *repression* or domination, not homosexuality: "Where at least the social taboo against homosexuality is more modest, for instance in many aristocratic closed societies, homosexuals appear to be less neurotic, in terms of characterology less deformed than in Germany."<sup>128</sup>

## V. Rethinking Critical Theory

I now turn to three lessons from my analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno's thoughts on "homosexuality" and critique that can help sustain Horkheimer's hope that Critical Theory will "be aroused ever anew by

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125 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," 79.

126 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," 79-80.

127 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," 80. *Anaclisis* refers to "an extreme dependence on another person for emotional or physical support or both." See APA Dictionary of Psychology, at: <https://dictionary.apa.org/anaclisis>. Even Marcuse, who regarded homosexuality more affirmatively, still called it a "perversion," albeit one "compatible with normality in high civilization." See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* 1966, 202-3.

128 Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and Law Today," 80; Halle, *Queer Social Philosophy*, 168.

prevailing injustice.”<sup>129</sup> First, their analysis illuminates how Critical Theory can address the entwinement of norms of gender and sexuality with conceptions of the nation, the state, and racialized and class divisions. Second, the shortcomings of their analysis of “homosexuality” call for a *queering* of Critical Theory that is attentive to multiple, interseccing axes of power and social identity. Third, the limitations of Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of “homosexuality” lend qualified support to two proposals that Honneth has advanced to revitalize Critical Theory: his call for reconstructive criticism with a “genealogical proviso,”<sup>130</sup> and his suggestion that Critical Theory should replace a narrow focus on class domination with broader attention to social struggles for recognition.

*i. Critique, from anti-fascism to homonationalism*

Caught up in the prejudices of their time, Horkheimer and Adorno misconstrued links between homosexuality and authoritarianism. Their larger concern, however, was spectre of fascism looming behind the entwinement of nationalism and capitalism.<sup>131</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno address this interface assemblage in relation to the pathologies and inequalities of twentieth century capitalism. The First World War, the failed German revolution of 1918-19, and the rise of National Socialism demonstrated that many workers often identify with their nation before they identify with fellow “workers of the world.”<sup>132</sup> Nationalism, as Benedict Anderson observes, has been characterized by a sense of “deep horizontal comradeship” that typically has been *fraternal*, shaped by masculinist ideals and homosocial forms of male bonding.<sup>133</sup> As Horkheimer

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129 Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 241.

130 Honneth, “Reconstructive Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso,” 44.

131 See Theodor W. Adorno, “What Has National Socialism Done to the Arts,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 373-90.

132 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), ch. 6; Benedict Anderson, “Introduction,” in *Mapping the Nation*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 2012), 7-8.

133 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7; Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Som-

and Adorno highlighted, however, the egalitarian affectations of these political formations have been undercut by the structured inequalities of racial capitalism.<sup>134</sup>

Underlying Horkheimer and Adorno's more problematic comments about homosexuality was an enduring insight about psycho-social dynamics of pathic projection – the tendency of repressed subjects to “attempt to transfer [the suffering they feel] onto other, weaker groups.”<sup>135</sup> This propensity was evident in the activities of masculinists in the Weimar homosexual liberation movement; and it illuminates ongoing obstacles to Horkheimer and Adorno's emancipatory aim to liberate all people from social domination.<sup>136</sup> For example, the masculinist writer Benedict Friedländer (see sec. I), who as a Jewish homosexual was, as Mosse says, “twice locked out of normative society,” endorsed “Aryanism” and anti-Semitism as part of “a revival of ‘manly culture.’”<sup>137</sup>

This exclusionary nationalism of Weimar era masculinists, like Friedländer, moreover, partially prefigured the recent phenomenon of *homonationalism*. Jasbir Puar characterizes homonationalism as the tendency within Western (mainly US and European) gay and lesbian rights movements to “slip[] into Islamophobic and racist discourses that in many ways propagate or support racist agendas” with gay rights becoming a standard “through which nations, populations and cultures

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mer, and Patricia Yaeger, “Introduction,” in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed., Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 6; Joane Nagel, “Masculinity and nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998), 242-269.

134 In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno pinpointed the contradictions of racial capitalism in the anti-Semitism of German National Socialism, although they failed to confront its global colonial dimensions. They explain that the Nazis gave working class, non-Jewish Germans a target for their frustrations and vicarious empowerment even as German capitalism left them a subordinated class (143).

135 Adorno, “Sexual Taboos and Law Today,” 79, 77.

136 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 165.

137 Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 41; Whisnant, *Queer Identities*, 35.



are evaluated in terms of their ability to conform to a universalised notion of civilization."<sup>138</sup> This phenomenon has been manifest in the recent "employment of gender and sexuality as alibis for legitimizing violence against (religious) minorities within Europe as well as military interventions in the non-Western world."<sup>139</sup> Homonationalism thus echoes exclusionary tendencies of the Weimar masculinists; and it follows the pattern of earlier Western "women's rights" discourses that used the status of women as benchmarks of social "progress" and "civilization" in non-western societies to justify European colonialism and imperialism.<sup>140</sup> It is also a product of our era of intensifying globalization and post-colonial migrations.<sup>141</sup>

There are notable differences, however, between homonationalism and the exclusionary practices of the Weimar era German masculinists, which the Nazis took to violent extremes after 1933. In the wake of the First World War, German masculinists were reacting to stark social and legal marginalization of homosexuals; the rise of homonationalism, Nikita Dhawan explains, has coincided with "unprecedented sociocultural and legal gains for queer politics, including the decriminalization of antisodomy laws as well as the recognition of the human rights of sexual minorities internationally."<sup>142</sup> The growing acceptance of LGBTQ persons in Western countries remains circumscribed, however: it favors those whose lives otherwise mesh with dominant norms of liberal democratic capitalist societies – notably, LGBTQ persons who are white, have disposable income, and whose intimate and familial relationships mirror

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138 Puar, "To be gay and racist is no anomaly."

139 Dhawan, "Homonationalism and state-phobia," 51. Monin Rahman uses the term "homocolonialism" to capture this colonialist character. See Momin Rahman, "Querying the equation of sexual diversity with modernity: Towards a homocolonialist test," in *Queering Paradigms V*, 91-111.

140 The German masculinists were in effect homonationalists *avant la lettre*.

141 Susan P. Mains, Mary Gilmartin, Declan Cullen, Robina Mohammad, Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, Parvati Raghuram, and Jamie Winders, "Postcolonial migrations," *Social & Cultural Geography* 14, no. 2 (2013), 131-144, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2012.753468.

142 Dhawan, "Homonationalism and state-phobia," 51.

monogamous heterosexual relationships. This depoliticized “homonormativity” has been institutionalized through legal recognition of same sex marriage rights in a growing number of countries.<sup>143</sup> Homonationalism thus mirrors pathic projection insofar as its agents often experience a fragile or partial inclusion in their societies: they may have earned legal rights, but without full-fledged social acceptance.<sup>144</sup> Like pathic projection, it can enhance vulnerable subjects’ sense of inclusion in their home countries at the expense of excluded or more vulnerable others who are its targets.

This situation poses the challenge of how to address homophobic and heteronormative forms of oppression “in diasporic communities and the postcolonial world” without resorting to cultural imperialism.<sup>145</sup> Meeting this challenge calls for a critical cosmopolitanism that looks to transnational forms of collective problem-solving while working, as Walter D. Mignolo says, to “reconceive cosmopolitanism from the perspective of coloniality.”<sup>146</sup> To do this, cosmopolitanism must become critical and dialogical “from the perspective of those local histories that had to deal all along with [colonial] global designs”; it must respect “diversity as a universal and cosmopolitan project in which everyone participates instead

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143 Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, 52-64; Schotten, “Homonationalism.” As of October 2019, “30 countries and territories [had] enacted national laws allowing gays and lesbians to marry, mostly in Europe and the Americas.” See Pew Research Center, “Same-Sex Marriage Around the World,” October 23, 2019, at: <https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/gay-marriage-around-the-world/>.

144 James Kirchick, surveying gay authoritarianism, speaks of “a sense of alienation ... that all gay people, as sexual minorities in societies that do not fully accept them, inevitably experience.” See James Kirchick, “A Thing for Men in Uniforms,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 14, 2018, at: <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/05/14/a-thing-for-men-in-uniforms/>.

145 Dhawan, “Homonationalism and state-phobia,” p. 51.

146 Gerard Delanty and Neal Harris, “The idea of critical cosmopolitanism,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, 2nd edition, ed. Gerard Delanty (London: Routledge, 2018), 93; Walter D. Mignolo, “The Many Faces of Cosmopolis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism,” in *Cosmopolitanism*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 159.

of ‘being participated.’”<sup>147</sup> Critical cosmopolitanism would not rule out appeals to human rights to protect people against homophobic and heteronormative practices. But it would take their lead from local efforts and work to treat all affected parties with equal respect.<sup>148</sup> To respect the local histories of the colonized with regard to gender and sexuality, critical cosmopolitanism must appreciate what María Lugones has called the “modern/colonial gender system”: the global dissemination of a Eurocentric gender system generated by European colonialism. It involves the spread of culturally specific concepts, norms, and practices of gender and sexuality, such as “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality.”<sup>149</sup>

ii. *Queering Critical Theory*

The de-reifying aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno Critical Theory – its scrutiny of how cultural conventions come to be regarded as unchangeable – resonates with queer theory).<sup>150</sup> Indeed, a *queering* of Frankfurt School Critical Theory seems to be just where the de-reifying aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno’s work should lead with respect to gender, sexuality, love, and family.<sup>151</sup> Beyond addressing homonationalism, *queering* Critical Theory demands incorporating into Critical Theory further theoretical insights from queer theory. This would involve recognizing the

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147 Mignolo, “The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis,” 182.

148 For a related analysis of this topic, see Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 96-107.

149 María Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 186-209; Boris Bertolt, “Can we start the debate? Homosexuality and Coloniality of Gender in Africa,” *Justice, Power and Resistance: Journal of the European Group for the Study of Deviance and Social Control* 2, no. 2 (2018), 388–406.

150 See Floyd, *Reification of Desire*; Love, “Queer Critique, Queer Refusal”; Gambino, “‘A More Thorough Resistance?’”

151 Consider the echoes of Horkheimer call for Critical Theory to be continually “aroused ... anew” by injustice (“Traditional and Critical Theory,” 241) in Judith Butler’s insistence that the term ‘queer’ “will have to remain ... never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.” See Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *GLQ* 1 (1993), 19.

diversity and fluidity of genders and sexualities, which cannot readily be fixed identity categories such as ‘heterosexual,’ ‘homosexual,’ ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian,’ ‘transgender,’ ‘bi-sexual,’ ‘intersex,’ and even ‘queer,’ and “have no fixed political referent.”<sup>152</sup> It would comprehend how gender identities and sexual orientations are differently experienced across intersecting social identity differences of “race,” class, religion, and ethnicity.<sup>153</sup> Marcuse anticipated aspects of this emancipatory project when he called for “a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality.”<sup>154</sup>

The diversity of genders and sexualities across cultures bears out Adorno’s points about the “natural-historical” character of human societies. Humanity, he notes, necessarily includes reification as well as ongoing social transformations.<sup>155</sup> Accordingly, Critical Theory should not seek to dissolve “the tension between the conventional and natural.”<sup>156</sup> People routinely produce customs, rules, conventions, and institutions with a relatively enduring but changeable character through which they give meaning, purpose, and value to their lives in diverse ways; so not all such reifications can or should simply be rejected. Rather, Critical Theory should aim to transform cultural conventions and institutions that perpetuate oppression and suffering in a manner that advances equal respect, social freedom, and justice for all. While same-sex sexual practices seem to have “occurred at all times, all over the world,” as Hirschfeld observed in 1897, they have had different meanings in different societies.<sup>157</sup> For instance, in Africa, Boris Bertolt explains, European propagation of the modern/colonial gender system “gave a name [i.e., ‘homosexuality’] to a sexual practice that existed in some societies but whose meaning was

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152 David L. Eng, with Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” *Social Text* 23, nos 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2005), 3.

153 Butler, “Critically Queer,” 19-21; Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics,” *GLQ* 3 (1997), 437-65.

154 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 201; Floyd, *Reification of Desire*, ch. 3.

155 Adorno, “Idea of Natural History,” 111-18; Adorno, “Aldous Huxley,” 106.

156 Adorno, “Aldous Huxley,” 105.

157 Scientific Humanitarian Committee, “Petition to the Reichstag,” 135.

different from the Eurocentric conception"; and this process went hand in hand with the spread of heterosexism.<sup>158</sup>

Concerning the politics of gender and sexuality, then, queering Critical Theory demands work to overturn heteronormative and other restrictive cultural norms of gender, sexuality, and family that deny some people equal respect for their genders and sexualities.<sup>159</sup> Yet, so that this project do not entail cultural imperialism, it must be pursued in ways that respect the myriad religious and cultural meanings that people attach to gender, sexuality, and family within the limits of the harm principle.<sup>160</sup>

At the same time, queering Critical Theory requires an *intersectional* approach to multiple axes of social power and social identity – e.g., gender, sexuality, nationality, class, race, gender, religion, and disability/able bodiedness. Horkheimer and Adorno verged on such an approach to National Socialism, analyzing the entwinement of anti-semitism, class divisions, sexuality, and civic belonging; but they were tripped up by their reliance on heteronormative conceptions. Social identity differences of gender, sexuality, race, class, nationality, religion, and disability/able bodiedness “are intrinsically intertwined and therefore concrete conditions of social inequality cannot be adequately grasped in isolation from one another.”<sup>161</sup> This is so even as we find different constellations of social power and social identity in different societies. Thus, German National

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158 Bertolt, “Can we start the debate?,” 403.

159 Michel Foucault, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: Foucault and Homosexuality,” in Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kristzman (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 289.

160 Anna Elisabetta Galeotti “Multicultural claims and equal respect,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, nos. 3-4 (2010), 443; Schotten, “Homonalism.”

161 Fischer and Tepe, “‘What’s Critical about Critical Theory,’” 143. See also Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens.” The notion of intersectionality may not travel seamlessly across diverse societies, however. See Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, “Race, Class, Gender: Reclaiming Baggage in Fast Travelling Theories,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 12, no. 3 (2005): 249–265, DOI: 10.1177/1350506805054267.

Socialism was not simply anti-Semitic, homophobic, and sexually repressive. Rather, as historian Dagmar Herzog notes, the goal of Nazi sexual politics “was to reinvent [sexuality] as the privilege of non-disabled, heterosexual Aryans.”<sup>162</sup> Nazi theories of deviant sexualities encompassed not only homosexual men and lesbians, but also Jews and non-Jewish “heterosexually nonconformist women.”<sup>163</sup>

These intersectional considerations have significant implications for Adorno and Horkheimer’s notion of pathic projection, which involves groups that *feel* repressed projecting their “onto other, weaker groups.”<sup>164</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the agents and targets of pathic projection are “interchangeable” depending upon what social group (or groups) is dominant, representing the “norm,” and what groups are marginalized in a given social order: “vagrants, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, so each of them can replace the murderer, in the same lust for killing, as soon as he feels the power of representing the norm.”<sup>165</sup> An intersectional understanding of group dynamics, however, highlights how in modern capitalist societies many (if not most) people are simultaneously relative-

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162 Dagmar Herzog, “Hubris and Hypocrisy, Incitement and Disavowal: Sexuality and German Fascism.” In *Sexuality and German Fascism*, ed. by Dagmar Herzog (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 4.

163 Dagmar Herzog, “How “Jewish” is German Sexuality?: Sex and Antisemitism in the Third Reich,” in *German History from the Margins*, eds. Neil Gregor, Nils Roemer, Mark Roseman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 186; Elizabeth D. Heineman, “Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, nos. 1-2 (January/April 2002), 49.

164 Adorno, “Sexual Taboos and Law Today,” 79, 77.

165 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 140. Adorno later remarked, “Tomorrow a group other than the Jews may come along, say the elderly, ... or the intellectuals, or simply deviant groups.” See Theodor W. Adorno, “Education After Auschwitz,” in Adorno, *Critical Models*, 203. See also Lars Rensmann, “The Persistence of the Authoritarian Appeal: On the Frankfurt School as a Framework for Studying Populist Actors in European Democracies,” in *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, ed. Jeremiah Morelock (London: University of Westminster Press, 2018), 29-47; Joseph M. Weiss, “Understanding Fascism Today: Nationalism, Group Psychology, and the Return of the Old,” *Rethinking Marxism* 32, no. 4 (2020), 513.

ly advantaged *and* disadvantaged along different axes of social power and identity. People generally do not inhabit one-dimensional positions within social divisions – say, as simply capitalists or wage laborers, men or women, colonizers or colonized, “heterosexuals” or “homosexuals,” although such divisions will be consequential in many contexts.<sup>166</sup> Instead, they simultaneously inhabit intersecting social hierarchies and social identities rooted in social class, “race,” gender, sexuality, religion, etc. *Some* groups are advantaged across multiple axes of power and social identity (e.g., affluent white heterosexual able-bodied men in North America); others are marginalised and disadvantaged across multiple axes of power and social identity (e.g., Black queer women in North America); many more groups are simultaneously advantaged *and* disadvantaged along different axes of power and identity (e.g., white working class straight men; white gender non-binary persons in well-paid professions; middle class, Black cis-gender, heterosexual men; middle-class, cis-gender, heterosexual Muslim women in Europe and North America).<sup>167</sup>

An intersectional approach to pathic projection thus alerts us to at least three likely scenarios. First, we can expect that those who are multiply oppressed or marginalized (e.g., queer people of color; poor Black and Indigenous women) are at special risk of being targets of pathic projection. This point is compatible with an appreciation of how particular events, like the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, might engender other targets.<sup>168</sup> Second, the potential *agents* of pathic projection – people inclined to project their grievances onto weaker groups – may be many. They might include those who feel repressed due to a marginalized or subordinate social status with respect to at least one aspect of

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166 Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*.

167 Nira Yuval-Davis, “Beyond the Recognition and Re-distribution Dichotomy: Intersectionality and Stratification,” in *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*, ed. Helma Lutz, Maria Teresa Herrera Vivar, and Linda Supik (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 155-169.

168 David Jenemann, “The Legacy of the *Authoritarian Personality*,” in *A Companion to Adorno*, 283.

their intersecting social identities; they might also include people, like many white Americans, who are relatively advantaged by intersecting hierarchies but feel their historically established expectations of social status and material well-being to be endangered.<sup>169</sup> The latter tendency appears to be salient to the recent rise of nationalistic forms of populism in numerous countries.<sup>170</sup> Third, insofar as sexuality “becomes the nerve centre” of a given society, as Adorno suggested, targets of pathic project might include not only people in same-sex relationships, but a range of people who might be deemed “queer” or “deviant” in a given society insofar as their genders, sexualities, and family structures fall outside of dominant norms of gender, sexuality, and family.<sup>171</sup>

As Adorno and Horkheimer highlight, underlying structural conditions that provoke pathic projection are basic to racialized capitalist societies with sharp, shifting intersecting inequalities. The division of labor entails that the labor of many is commended by a relative within countries and across the globe, while the democratic promise of autonomy is “not fully realized in the prevailing system.”<sup>172</sup> Social safety nets are often fragile and limited; and while the flow of capital is relatively unimpeded across nation-state boundaries, states more tightly regulate the movement of laborers, often in light of ethno-nationalist ideologies.<sup>173</sup> These tendencies of global capitalism are complicated but not negated by the proliferation of small business people, including farmers, in capitalist

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169 Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106 (June 1993), 1707-

1791; Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), ch. 5.

170 Rensmann, “The Persistence of the Authoritarian Appeal,” 36; J. Weiss, “Understanding Fascism.”

171 Adorno, “Sexual Taboos and Law Today,” 77; Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” 456-62.

172 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aspects of Right Wing Extremism*, trans. Wieland Hoban, with an afterword by Volker Weiss (Cambridge, UK: Polity, [1967] 2020), 2-9, 27; Horkheimer, “Materialism and Morality,” 109.

173 Étienne Balibar, *Equaliberty: Political Essays*, trans James Ingram (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); J. Weiss, “Understanding Fascism.”



societies. As Adorno says, these groups often “want to cling to, and possibly reinforce, their privileges and social status”; and thus they tend to oppose socialism even as they are threatened by the “tendency toward concentration” of capital, along with its intensifying globalization.<sup>174</sup> While the sovereignty of “individual nations and states” is constrained by globalizing trends, reactive nationalism endures as “‘pathic’ nationalism.”<sup>175</sup> Consequently, the specter of fascism that haunted early Critical Theory has not been overcome.<sup>176</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno located a further manifestation of these dynamics in how human domination of non-human nature plays out in consumer capitalism.<sup>177</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they write, “The increase in economic productivity which creates the conditions for a more just world also affords the technical apparatus and the social groups controlling it a disproportionate advantage over the rest of the population, the individual is entirely nullified in the face of the economic powers.”<sup>178</sup> With consumerism of contemporary capitalism, even many poor and working class people experience a tenuous measure of freedom and power despite a lack of fulfilling work and tangible self-determination.<sup>179</sup> Adorno finds this dual sense of power and powerlessness crystallized in people’s relationships with automobiles. “Which driver,” he asks, “is not tempted, merely by the power of his engine, to wipe out the vermin of the street, pedestrians, children and cyclists?”<sup>180</sup> Yet, not only is this pow-

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174 Adorno, *Aspects of Right Wing Extremism*, 6, 2; Theodor W. Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, ed. Christoph Ziermann; trans. Nicolas Walker (Cambridge, UK: Polity, [1958] 2017), 120-23.

175 Adorno, *Aspects of Right Wing Extremism*, 5.

176 Peter E. Gordon, “The Authoritarian Personality Revisited: Reading Adorno in the Age of Trump,” *boundary 2*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2017), 31-56; Volker Weiss, “Afterword,” in Adorno, *Aspects of Right Wing Extremism*, 42-64.

177 In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno refer at one point to “all the persecuted, whether animals or human beings” (165; also 203-12).

178 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii.

179 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 138-50; Adorno, “What Has National Socialism Done to the Arts,” 377-84.

180 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 40.

er unequally distributed and dependent of oppressive, globalized labor chains; its ecological costs are unsustainable in terms of climate change, a sixth global wave of species extinctions, and oceanic pollution.<sup>181</sup>

*iii. Honneth's two proposals for Critical Theory*

a. Reconstructive criticism with a proper genealogical proviso

My reconsideration of Horkheimer and Adorno's thoughts of "homosexuality" and critique lends support for Honneth's proposal to supplement reconstructive criticism with a "genealogical proviso."<sup>182</sup> Yet, Honneth's version of a genealogy, which is an extension of his method of "normative reconstruction," is ill-suited to the task. What is needed is a genealogical proviso in the vein of Michel Foucault's understanding of genealogical criticism.

Consider the insights and limitations of Horkheimer materialist analysis of how the societal regulation of sexuality and the family has been "economically conditioned" in capitalist societies.<sup>183</sup> Horkheimer sheds lights on how gay liberation struggles found a receptive context in liberal democratic capitalist societies in the 1960s and 1970s. Changing attitudes concerning homosexuality and other nonnormative forms of gender and sexuality, crystalized in the LGBTQ movement, have been spurred by

181 Considering "[t]he use of zoos for entertainment and instruction," Adorno observes, "The more purely nature is preserved and transplanted by civilization, the more implacably it is dominated" (*Minima Moralia*, 115).

182 Honneth, "Reconstructive Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso," 44.

183 Horkheimer, "Authority and the Family," 58. Honneth's approach is a version of immanent critique. See Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 7-17; Antti Kauppinen, "Reason, Recognition, and Internal Critique," *Inquiry* 45 (2002), 479-98. Adorno's "negative dialectical" method is somewhat distinctive. He emphasizes the "non-identity" of moral concepts and "a concrete denunciation of the inhuman" in social practices, which yields what Titus Stahl calls a "negative" version of immanent critique. See Theodor W. Adorno, *The Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Schröder; trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 175; Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 205; Titus Stahl, "Immanent Critique and Particular Moral Experience," *Critical Horizons*, 2017, DOI: 10.1080/14409917.2017.1376939.

other liberation movements of the post-World War II era – notably, feminism, decolonization, and civil rights movements; and they were produced by changing political economic conditions. The latter included the decline of the family wage and the increasing participation of women in labor markets; the extended period that time period during which children typically spend in formal educational institutions and financially dependent on parents or guardians; the weakening of the nuclear family norm; and the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s, spurred by the other changes and the development of the birth-control pill.<sup>184</sup> Moreover, immanent critique matches how some German homosexual liberationists and later queer activists have sought to extend existing ideas of privacy rights, sexual freedom, and equality to LGBTQ persons.<sup>185</sup> Yet, as I noted in section III, while Horkheimer highlighted historical changes in “monogamous marriage,” he regarded the heteronormative aspect of marriage as fixed.

Relatedly, even when Adorno, in 1963, called for critical scrutiny of “[d]ogmatic concepts that still haunt legislation today,” he reiterated their view of “homosexuality” as a neurosis.<sup>186</sup> Adorno’s position is ironic given how in his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, also in 1963, he says that positive “moral imperatives” have lost their former theoretical underpinning “as the link with religion has been cut.”<sup>187</sup> He adds, “[T]he most drastic instances of this are in the realm of sexual morality.”<sup>188</sup> Horkheimer and

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184 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1994), 270-323; Rahman, “Querying the equation of sexual diversity with modernity,” 98-99; Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer*, ch. 1.

185 In the US, this approach has been pursued with some success in the Supreme Court cases *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), in which the the Court ruled that U.S. laws that prohibited private homosexual sexuality are unconstitutional, and *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015), in which the Court held that equality protection and due process clauses of the U.S. Constitution require that states license and recognize an equal right of same-sex couples to marriage.

186 Adorno, “Sexual Taboos and Law Today,” 80, 87.

187 Adorno, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 170.

188 Adorno, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 170; Cook, *Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West*, 15.

Adorno's commitment to immanent critique cannot address this aporia in their Critical Theory because it evades fundamental questions: why have "homosexuals" and other gender and sexual nonconforming persons long been denied equal recognition as proper subjects of sexual freedom and mutual respect?<sup>189</sup>; and why have even radical critics like themselves so often failed to critique heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality?<sup>190</sup> Thus, Adorno and Horkheimer failed to consider how medicalized ideas about "homosexuality" as pathology emerged out of Judeo-Christian theological ideas of same-sex sexuality as sinful and "unnatural."<sup>191</sup>

This shortcoming was due partly to how they were limited by their own historically situated preconceptions. Adorno grasped this difficulty when he noted that "even critical thought" can be "infected by what it criticizes" (2005b, 71). Yet, this raises the crucial question of how Critical Theory can best sustain its critical edge given such historical limitations of human understanding. In this regard, immanent critique is better equipped to address what Adorno calls "universal and comprehensive concepts," such as 'freedom,' 'justice,' 'class,' 'society,' 'the state,' and 'prejudice,' than to analyze exclusionary concepts like 'homosexuality' or 'race.'<sup>192</sup> In the case of the former, Adorno explains that "dialectical thought cannot dispense with ... [such] concepts" and must analyze their unrealized potential.<sup>193</sup> In the case of the latter, critical theorists need to grasp how concepts such as 'homosexuality' and 'race' are rooted in modern scientific discourses that were forged and disseminated in the nexus of asymmetrical forms of power.<sup>194</sup>

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189 Alexander García Düttmann, *Between Cultures: Tensions in the Struggle for Recognition*, trans. Kenneth B. Woodgate (London: Verso, 2000), 103-20.

190 Warner, "Introduction"; Amidon, "What Happens to Countess Geschwitz?"

191 Adorno and Horkheimer might have followed the lead of their own account of how modern racist anti-Semitism drew upon earlier Christian anti-Jewish thought. See Fabian Freyenhagen, "Adorno and Horkheimer on Anti-Semitism," in *A Companion to Adorno*, 114.

192 Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 32-33, 201-5.

193 Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 205, 86, 217.

194 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: An Introduction (New York:

Honneth's version of reconstructive criticism with a genealogical proviso similarly falls short. Reconstructive criticism, he says, seeks "to uncover normative ideals of the institutions and practices of social reality itself that can be suitable for the criticism of the existing reality."<sup>195</sup> It highlights preexisting horizons of meanings and thus enables social critics to identify injustices "that can also potentially be perceived as wrong by other members of society."<sup>196</sup> The *genealogical proviso*, Honneth maintains, allows critics to expose ways in which well established moral principles "have lost their original meaning" or have come "to legitimate a disciplinary or repressive practice."<sup>197</sup>

This sort of genealogy critique elides the chief deficiency of Horkheimer and Adorno's thoughts on "homosexuality." Honneth himself endorses the "demands for recognition" that LGBTQ persons make in relation to their fellow citizens.<sup>198</sup> The basic problem, however, is different from cases where well-established moral principles of a society "have lost their original meaning." It is that certain members of society *have come to be regarded* in ways that have excluded them from being recognized fully as rightful subjects of freedom, equality, and mutual respect because they do not conform to prevailing norms of gender and sexuality.<sup>199</sup>

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Vintage, [1978] 1990), 94; Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 109-33.

195 Honneth, "Reconstructive Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso," 48.

196 Honneth, "Reconstructive Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso," 44.

197 Honneth, "Reconstructive Criticism with a Genealogical Proviso," 47, 45, 48.

198 Axel Honneth, "Redistribution as Recognition," in Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, trans. Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke (London: Verso, 2003), 162-63.

199 As Amy Allen says, Honneth's approach can illuminate how accepted normative principles "can go astray, but it has nothing to say about the norms themselves." See Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 107. M. T. C. Shafer has applied Honneth's method more systematically to LGBTQ liberation struggles and clarifies how Honneth's theory can illuminate possibilities emancipatory social change "incipient in past devel-

This is where Critical Theory needs a genealogical proviso informed by Michel Foucault's approach to genealogy.<sup>200</sup> Genealogy in this vein involves "tracing of effects and dynamics of power behind and below the already constituted objects of history, ... tell[ing] their history in the form of narratives of power."<sup>201</sup> As Judith Butler explains, genealogy "investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin."<sup>202</sup>

Returning to the modern politics of "homosexuality," a key underpinning was simultaneously political and epistemic, as Foucault explains. During the nineteenth century, Europe experienced a shift from a predominantly religious and moral framework for understanding sexuality

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opments." Shafer maintains that Honneth's method can support forms of "queer intimacy" that historically have been disparaged in modern societies. Yet, like Honneth, Shafer evades the question of *why* gender and sexual non-conforming persons have for so long experienced marginalization and misrecognition in modern liberal democratic societies. See M. T. C. Shafer, "The utopian shadow of normative reconstruction," *Constellations* 25, no. 3 (September 2018), 413.

200 This turn to Foucault's understanding of genealogy might seem to conflict with my discussions of repression given Foucault's critique of the "repressive hypothesis" in *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault does not deny repressive aspects of power view, however. He insists that power is also *productive*, constituting forms of knowledge and social identity: "[I]t is not a question of denying the existence of repression. It's one of showing that repression is always part of a much more complex political strategy regarding sexuality" (Foucault, quoted in Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West* [London: Verso, 2018], 67 n. 25). See also Halle, *Queer Social Philosophy*, 159.

201 Martin Saar, "Understanding Genealogy: History, Power, and the Self," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2 (2008), 307. Here my analysis builds upon previous efforts to combine Frankfurt School Critical Theory and Foucauldian genealogy. See Michael Kelly, ed., *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994); David Owen, "Criticism and Captivity: On Genealogy and Critical Theory," *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (August 2002), 216-30; Martin Saar, "Genealogy and Subjectivity," *European Journal of Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (August 2002), 231-45; Allen, *The End of Progress*; Cook, *Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West*.

202 Judith Butler, "Preface" (1990), in Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, tenth anniversary edition (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxix.

to an increasingly scientific and medical framework – that is, in terms of normality and pathology.<sup>203</sup> The concept of “homosexuality” was part of this process: “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the [religiously understood] practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”<sup>204</sup> That is, to be a “sodomite” was a matter of doing sexual acts deemed sinful – not a matter of what one *was*; medicalization established new categories of persons, including “the homosexual,” which construed a person in terms of what he or she *was* rather than what he or she *did*.<sup>205</sup>

Of course, the politics of sexuality is still informed by how many people – in various ways – continue to understand sexuality largely in religious and moral terms. Nonetheless, Horkheimer and Adorno’s thinking exemplifies how even many progressive thinkers during the twentieth century employed “erudite knowledge” to buttress prevailing regimes of sexuality.<sup>206</sup> When the Critical Theorists failed to engage the work of early German advocates of homosexual emancipation they missed a powerful challenge to prevailing scientific knowledge about sexual and gender “normality.”<sup>207</sup> In Foucault’s terms, the German movement constituted an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” whereby groups that been subjugated based on a “common regime” of thought perceptively challenge this epistemic regime.<sup>208</sup>

The salience of Foucault’s genealogical approach to power/knowledge for Critical Theory arguably reaches beyond sexuality. Assessing Foucault’s legacy in light of changing views of homosexuality, Paul

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203 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 38-41.

204 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 43.

205 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 42-56.

206 Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 8; Oosterhuis, “The ‘Jews’ of the Antifascist Left,” 239-40.

207 Amidon, “What Happens to Countess Geschwitz?,” 12-13.

208 Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 6-7.

Veyne comments, "Certain prejudices such as homophobia are fading away; we have realized how arbitrary such a mind-set is (the materiality of that incorporeal idea). But do we not have other prejudices?"<sup>209</sup> In brief, a Foucauldian genealogical proviso offers Critical Theory a way to sustain ongoing critical reflection on epistemological "orderings and the ethical precepts to which they give rise," including current norms, concepts, and prejudices.<sup>210</sup> It thus can help Critical Theory remain self-reflexive with respect to political and epistemic struggles over such things as racism, gender, colonialism, criminology, disability, and animals rights.<sup>211</sup> These are areas where societal power dynamics have shaped authoritative discourses of what is true and false. These discourses, in turn, have undergirded moral judgments and certain uses of social and political power.

This is due to how genealogy seeks a "historical knowledge of struggles"; it is a "way of playing local, discontinuous, disqualified, or non-legitimized knowledges off against the unitary theoretical instance that claims to be able to filter them, ... organize them in the name of a true body of knowledge."<sup>212</sup> Social struggles often generate an upsurge of nonlegitimized or counter-hegemonic perspectives that can reveal how prevailing forms of knowledge, consolidated through established sociological and scientific concepts and identities (e.g., "homosexual," "heterosexual," "native," "white race," etc.), may support oppression.

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209 Paul Veyne, *Foucault: His Thought, His Character*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 91.

210 Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in *The Political*, ed. David Ingram (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 219.

211 On criminology, see Foucault's book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; on colonialism, see Anne Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); on the interplay of race and sex, see Ladelle McWhorter, "Sex, Race, and Biopower: A Foucauldian Genealogy," *Hypatia* 19, no. 3 (August 2004), 38-62; on disability, see Shelley Tremain, ed., *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

212 Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 8-9.



b. Queer politics and the politics of recognition

Conversely, Honneth's reconstructive call to reorient Critical Theory in relation to "the social causes responsible for systemic violation of conditions of recognition" offers a way to judge which social struggles would diminish social suffering and advance justice, and which would do the opposite.<sup>213</sup> Honneth contends that "the multifarious efforts of a struggle for recognition are what will enable Critical Theory to justify its normative claims."<sup>214</sup> We extend this thought to consider how diverse social struggles contest multiple, intersecting axes of power, oppression, and injustice. These struggles can reveal to critical theorists and political actors, or lead them to rethink, "decisive problems of existence" that they might previously have ignored, misunderstood, or underappreciated.<sup>215</sup>

As Honneth acknowledges, feelings of being disrespected or aggrieved are an "ambivalent source of motivation for social protest and resistance."<sup>216</sup> For instance, people might make claims of recognition in circumstances where they *feel* disrespected or mistreated, but where their claims of being unjustly treated are unfounded (e.g., where people are faced with the loss of unjustly accumulated wealth, power, property, or status). Alternatively, as Kristina Lepold says, people might respond to tangible experiences of social disrespect or humiliation in problematic

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213 Honneth, *Disrespect*, 72, 77-78. Contributions to the debate over recognition include Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*; Claudia Leeb, "The Politics of 'Misrecognition': A Feminist Critique," *The Good Society* 18, no. 1 (2009), 70-75; Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Georg W. Bertram and Robin Celikates, "Towards a Conflict Theory of Recognition: On the Constitution of Relations of Recognition in Conflict," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (2013), 838-861; Paddy McQueen, "Honneth, Butler and the ambivalent effects of recognition," *Res Publica*, 21 (2015), 43-60; Kristina Lepold, "Examining Honneth's Positive Theory of Recognition," *Critical Horizons* 20, no. 3 (2019), 246-61.

214 Honneth, *Disrespect*, 77.

215 Horkheimer, "The Social Function of Philosophy," 257.

216 Honneth, *Disrespect*, 77.

ways that “harm them or others, in which case recognition works ideologically” – what I have called pathologies of recognition.<sup>217</sup>

While not all social struggles are struggles for recognition in Honneth’s sense, reconsidering the German homosexual liberation movement suggests that many are struggles for recognition, or struggles that substantially involve issues of recognition or misrecognition.<sup>218</sup> Still, the question of recognition might seem utterly fraught for the project of *queering* Critical Theory insofar as ‘queer,’ as Annamarie Jagose explains, “is an identity category that has no interest in consolidating or even stabilising itself. ... Unlike those identity categories labelled lesbian or gay, queer has developed ... largely outside the registers of recognition, truthfulness and self-identity.”<sup>219</sup> Queer, Jagose adds, “is less an identity than a *critique* of identity.”<sup>220</sup>

Generally speaking, then, it is not the case that people who understand themselves as queer are seeking recognition *as queers* – that is, as a social identity group possessing a relatively stable collective identity.<sup>221</sup> And LGBTQ struggles encompass an array of social identities and

217 Lepold, “Examining Honneth’s Positive Theory of Recognition,” 256.

218 For instance, current struggles over social status in capitalist societies are often also struggles for recognition. See Cecilia L. Ridgeway, “Why Status Matters for Inequality,” *American Sociological Review* 79, no. 1 (2014) 1–16; Onni Hirvonen and Joonas Pennanen, “Populism as a pathological form of politics of recognition,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 22, no. 1 (2019), 27–44.

219 Annamarie Jagose, “Queer Theory,” *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 4 (December 1996), at: <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/1996/12/01/queer-theory/>.

220 Jagose, “Queer Theory.” There are affinities here between queer theory and Adorno’s notion of “non-identity” thinking, which underscores how placing any object in a concept or category obscures its particularities. Thus, when “B is defined as an A,” we need to appreciate that “it is always also *different from* and *more than* the A.” See Adorno, quoted in Cook, *Adorno, Foucault and the Critique of the West*, 21.

221 In Samuel Chambers’s summary, a queer approach to egalitarian democratic politics challenges the assumption of liberal identity politics “that there is a given and known subject of discrimination or oppression” *prior* to political contestation. See Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 161.

non-identities. Even in Germany's Weimar era homosexual emancipation movement, there was no singular group with a common identity to *recognize* or emancipate. Yet, these considerations do not entail that questions of recognition are irrelevant to the emancipatory aims of queer theory and politics. Instead, they indicate that experiences of having been socially disrespected are, as Honneth says, a "pre-theoretical resource" that demand normative judgments concerning the ways in which people "should struggle against the experience of disrespect and humiliation."<sup>222</sup>

For instance, a claim for recognition was implicit in the efforts of the German activists Ulrichs and Hirschfeld to secure basic respect and legal rights for "homosexual" persons to express freely their sexual desires.<sup>223</sup> Now consider the Queer Nation slogan in the United States in the 1990s, "We're here! We're queer! Get used to it!" Samuel Chambers argues that while we might be tempted to interpret this slogan as a demand for recognition, it involves no such claim: "we find nothing at all claimed by this 'queer' subject, and nothing at all *demanded* from the other."<sup>224</sup> For Chambers, rather than being a "call for *recognition as normal* ... [it is] an insistence that *deviation from the normal will persist*. ... If queer is that which resists normativity, getting used to it must mean not normalization but a persistence of queerness."<sup>225</sup> Yet, while the slogan is not a call for recognition *as normal*, it does involve a kind of recognition claim – a call for full social acceptance and equal respect for people who enact non-normative forms of gender and sexuality.<sup>226</sup> Moreover, this could be understood as a demand for a kind of "normalization" of queerness, where the recognition sought would necessarily transform the "normal" with the persistence of queerness included within widened of accepted gen-

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222 Honneth, *Disrespect*, 77; Lepold, "Examining Honneth's Positive Theory of Recognition," 254-57.

223 Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 18.

224 Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 160.

225 Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, 165-66.

226 Düttmann, *Between Cultures*, 103-20.

ders and sexualities.<sup>227</sup> This approach, moreover, qualifies Chambers's claim "queer is that which resists normativity": it would affirm a place for the sort of minimal norms that Foucault proposed when he endorsed complete freedom of sexual *choice* among consenting adults but not unbridled freedom of sexual *acts*, as some sexual acts, like rape, involve tangible harms.<sup>228</sup>

Judith Butler highlights the ambivalence of recognition – how there is always some heteronomy in claims and practices of recognition; how we cannot escape the force of intersubjectively constituted norms through which we come to "give an account of" ourselves (e.g., in our self-understandings).<sup>229</sup> Yet, Butler also insists on the indispensability of being so regarded as "a subject worthy of recognition": "if recognition is fully lacking, that is, a life is unrecognized, is refused recognition, and has no standing before the law, or is deprived of legal rights and protections, then that life is actually imperiled by the lack of recognition."<sup>230</sup>

Honneth, meanwhile, identifies "three forms of social recognition" that have special relevance here: emotional support in intimate social relationships; rights-based recognition as full-fledged members of society; and "the social esteem of individual achievements and abilities."<sup>231</sup> Heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia, which demean and threaten the well being of LGBTQ persons, have been significant features

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227 Heather Love calls this the "queer ordinary." See Heather Love, in "Doing Being Deviant: Deviance Studies, Description, and the Queer Ordinary," *differences* 26, no. 1 (2015), 91. See also James Ingram, "The Point of the Lesson: On Samuel Chambers's *The Lessons of Rancière*," 10.31.16, at: <https://syndicate.network/symposia/philosophy/lessons-of-ranciere/>.

228 Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act," 289.

229 Judith Butler, "Giving an Account of Oneself," *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (Winter, 2001), 26; Judith Butler, "Longing for Recognition Commentary on the Work of Jessica Benjamin," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 1, no. 3 (2000), 271-290, DOI: 10.1080/15240650109349159.

230 Judith Butler, in Rasmus Willig, "Recognition and critique: an interview with Judith Butler," *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 13, nos. 1 (2012), 140-41; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xix.

231 Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 46; Honneth, *Respect*, 74.

of the “institutionalized patterns of cultural value” in modern capitalist societies.<sup>232</sup> Accordingly, it is vital that LGBTQ persons gain robust social acceptance and equal respect from others “to enable [their] subjective well-being and successful agency in the social world.”<sup>233</sup> Honneth’s framework encompasses equal opportunities for all to realize love and mutual support in intimate relationships<sup>234</sup>; respect recognition secured and affirmed by legal equality (equal civil rights); and, regarding social esteem, it calls for working to ensure (in Fraser’s words) “that institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem.”<sup>235</sup>

The politics of recognition, then, encompasses not just affirmative recognition of distinct groups, but also recognition of individuals as legitimate claimants of rights and freedoms. This must include “support and affirmation for those” who transgress prevailing norms of gender and sexuality.<sup>236</sup> Such respect recognition for LGBTQ persons remains fragile in many countries where it has been advanced; and it is a pressing need globally with respect to ongoing struggles to secure the human rights of sexual minorities.<sup>237</sup>

Finally, the politics of recognition also encompasses the intersecting character of social identities. Thus, Alicia Garza, an Oakland labor orga-

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232 Nancy Fraser, “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation,” in Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 32.

233 Heikki Ikäheimo, “Recognition, Identity and Subjectivity,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed., Michael J. Thompson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 572.

234 One way that this goal has been sought, which Honneth discusses, is equal marriage rights (*Freedom’s Right*, 143-50). This aim has been questioned by some queer activists as offering civic equality only on the condition of the normalization of queer intimacy. What is crucial, however, is a commitment to advancing the goal of equal respect for all with respect to their intimate relationships.

235 Fraser, “Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics,” 36; Honneth, “Redistribution as Recognition,” 161-70.

236 Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 33.

237 Dhawan, “Homonationalism and state-phobia,” 51.

nizer who was one of the founders of the Movement for Black Lives Matter in the United States in 2013, has addressed how within the struggle to affirm the value of Black lives there is a struggle for equal respect among those whose lives are marginalized within the Black community based on nonnormative gender and sexuality. Speaking at a Trans Liberation Tuesday rally in San Francisco in August 2015, Garza said, “We understand that, in our communities, black trans folk, gender-nonconforming folk, black queer folk, black women, black disabled folk – we have been leading movements for a long time, but we have been erased from the official narrative.”<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Alicia Garza, quoted in Jelani Cobb, “The Matter of Black Lives,” *The New Yorker* (March 14, 2016), 38.

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## Critical Hermeneutics 2.0 A Necessary Update of the 'New German Ideology'

*Lubomír Dunaj*<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article is an attempt to re-examine the potential relevance of critical theory for East-Central European countries (inter alia). The main task consists in the need to resolve the question of how we can get beyond the 'eternal' image of the nation state, which is not capable of responding adequately to the global challenges of the twenty-first century on the one hand and avoid falling into the trap of 'globalism' that is insensitive to particularities, and consequently provokes harsh and radical reactions on the other. Hence, the paper addresses the criticism of 'abstract cosmopolitanism' from a participant's point of view and discusses a critique of Habermasian normative accounts from this embedded, applied and contextually concrete perspective. In the first part the focus lies on Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes's critique of the 'new German ideology', which is, however, in various respects problematic (I.). Nevertheless, certain parts of Krastev and Holmes's arguments are accepted in part 2 whereby the need to revise the radical critique of methodological nationalism is stressed (II.). In the third part it will be noted that this desirable methodological caution can already be found in the work of some contemporary critical theorists, particularly Axel Honneth. In the third and concluding part, using Axel Honneth's theory of justice but also Gerard Delanty's (III.) and Hans-Herbert Kögler's work (IV.), I subsequently attempt to identify a sort of 'third way' in order to avoid the various extreme versions of nationalism on the one hand or cosmopolitanism/globalism on the other hand, proposing a 'civilizational update' of critical hermeneutics.

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The erosion of liberal democracy in East-Central Europe has long been an issue. But the means of tackling it have thus far been thin, despite critical theory offering a number of inspiring ideas. With the onset of the Covid pandemic, the situation has worsened and since last autumn we have been witness to a growing dissatisfaction and a rise in civil disobedience. Criticism of pandemic measures has become a unifying leitmotif for the anti-‘establishment’ protests across the democratic world. To illustrate the severity of the situation, I provide an example from the country of my birth. In November 2020, for the first time since 1989, the pro-democracy movement did not take to the squares of Bratislava in celebration of ‘Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Day’<sup>2</sup>; instead, public spaces were occupied by a ragtag of supporters holding various extremist views – particularly the radical right, ‘antivaxxers’ and individuals with a variety of grievances. Various liberally inclined Slovak figures and media responded by warning that the ‘17th of November’ had been captured by anti-democratic forces, for instance, by citizens nostalgic for ‘real socialism’, but also by various conservative ‘anti-Western’ forces, not to mention outright fascists seeking to ‘wrest control over history’ and reassess Slovakia’s course since 1989. Meanwhile the ‘liberal voices’ did not stop short of arrogance or vulgarity, referring to the protesters as losers, brainwashed, sheep, monkeys, cattle and so forth, and even more colourful expressions (especially on social media). In so doing, they shut down the potential for dialogue and intelligent solutions.

The media, quite correctly, but in a most insensitive manner, highlighted the influence of the ‘anti-systemic forces’ loudly decrying ‘the blind alley of historical development’ since 1989 and ‘the squandering of thirty years’, even referring to liberal fascism or a new kind of ‘apartheid’. In the eyes of the dissatisfied inhabitants, the ‘West’ is to blame, as it has stolen our freedom and wishes only to exploit us. So what was the point in imitating it, a project forever doomed to failure? Critical theory is, of course, from this perspective one of the ‘diabolical Western ideolo-

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2 In both Slovakia and Czechia, ‘17th November’ is a public holiday in memory of the beginning of the protests against the communist regime in 1989.

gies'. Despite the plurality of voices within it and its indisputable contribution to philosophical thinking in many countries and the struggle for emancipation, it has been cast into the 'dustbin of history'. This school of philosophy, along with other Neo-Marxist streams of thought, is allegedly responsible for 'all that is bad' today.<sup>3</sup>

Of the critics of the Frankfurt School who have found a voice in Central Europe, particularly among the more conservative members of the public, I will mention only one – Patrick J. Buchanan, whose work is deliberately manipulative in places. He lays responsibility for the 'Death of the West' at the door of four Marxist theorists, György Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to tackle his often deliberately hodge-podge arguments in this short space so here I merely wish to express my bewilderment and even emit 'a deep sigh' at his conclusions – if only critical theorists had actually had the kind of influence on Western societies he subscribes to them. The reality is quite the opposite, even concerning the reasons Buchanan gives as to why, for instance, fewer children are born in the West than he would like (the subtitle of his book *The Death of the West* is 'How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization'); the causes are of course manifold and more attributable to neoliberalism than Neo-Marxism<sup>5</sup>. But what is important for the present study is

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3 Opponents frequently use the term cultural Marxism pejoratively to describe this movement, as its main agenda is allegedly to destroy the family, Western civilisation, traditions and so on. The term often has anti-Semitic connotations as well.

4 Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).

5 Given the complexity of modern Western societies, one cannot simply reduce the problem to one cause. But to give a specific example, we could ask how many young families in Slovakia (and elsewhere) would be grateful for at least one of the much ridiculed tiny 'rabbit hutch' flats ('council estates' – see the footnote 41), rather than having to take out enormous mortgages that can become 'time bombs' in times of economic downturn, and not just for the individual but society as a whole. Inaccessible housing, low salaries, high living costs and so forth are often far greater reason for why many families

the fact that both 'isms' come from the 'West'. The question therefore is: What is the 'West'? The West that the inhabitants of Slovakia and other countries in the eastern part of the Union should not have imitated, that has conned, disappointed us, and that has ultimately failed us. And what is it that we have imitated?

In the present study, I turn first to the collaborative book by the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev and American law and political science expert Stephen Holmes, published last year as *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*,<sup>6</sup> and which deals extensively with this issue of imitation. However, it is their critique of the 'new German ideology' (which they consider problematic in various respects) that is key to my analysis. Equally though, Krastev and Holmes's own analysis seems to be no less problematic, as the conclusion to the first part of this paper shows (I.). Hence I express doubt over whether 'the German path' to democracy truly lacks (normative) relevancy for the eastern part of the European Union, as these authors claim. Certainly there is room for some criticism and correction. And that is the focus of the second part, in which I accept part of Krastev and Holmes's arguments and stress the need to revise the radical critique of methodological nationalism (II.). However, as will be

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stop at one child, or why they never start a family at all. There are numerous statistics one can mention, such as the Eurostat data indicating that more than 50% of young Slovaks aged 25–34 still live with their parents. On the other hand, we could talk about Sweden, one of the most 'social democratic countries' in the world, which is socially organised in a manner that much more closely reflects the ideas of the critical theorists. Moreover, although Sweden is known to have a relatively loose relationship to the family, partnership unions (including same sex ones), divorce etc, according to Eurostat it has one of the highest birth rate in the European Union, which is usually put down to generous pro-family policies. Buchanan and critics like him can be assured that not all 'new' Swedish babies are born into immigrant families. In fullness, I should note that the term 'rabbit hutches' was mainly used by Václav Havel, who has become an iconic figure among many in the West – including critical theorists. His legacy in Czechia and especially in Slovakia is, however, more contradictory, where he is more popular among conservatives.

6 Ivan Krastev and Holmes Stephen, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).



noted, this desirable methodological caution can already be found in the work of some contemporary critical theorists, particularly Axel Honneth. In the third and concluding parts, using Axel Honneth's *theory of justice* but also Gerard Delanty's (III.) and Hans-Herbert Kögler's work (IV.), I subsequently attempt to outline a sort of 'third way' to an intra- and intercultural reconciliation, or at least a softening of the most strident positions, both between the various versions of Eastern European "Slavophiles" and "Westernizers" within countries and between the 'old' and 'new' European Union member states, where new discrepancies continually emerge that will at some point run the risk of threatening the unity of the European Union.<sup>7</sup> Such an desirable approach consists in a 'civilizational' update of *critical hermeneutics*.

## I.

The debate about 'imitation' is no stranger to those in the Czechoslovak setting, quite the opposite. It is as if 'forever' emulating certain model countries is the key to solving domestic problems. First the model country was France (after the first world war), followed by Germany (mostly in relation to Slovakia after 1938), then the Soviet Union (following the second world war) and subsequently the United States (after 1989). Of course given the small size of Slovakia and other countries in the region (with the exception of Poland and Ukraine) one can hardly expect them to come up with major historical initiatives that 'shake' the world. Equally, far greater creativity in seeking intelligent solutions would be more than desirable, as blindly following where others tread often has undesirable effects. The fate of these small states has not always been in the hands of their citizens alone, far from it.<sup>8</sup> It is all the more striking that even liberal

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7 My project does not, of course, merely concern Europe but is an attempt at turning critical theory into a truly global project. See, for example, my forthcoming book *Between Critical Theory and Chinese Philosophy: A prolegomenon to an Intercultural Dialogue* (Lanham: Lexington 2023).

8 Here one can mention Sartre's preface to the French and subsequent English edition of Antonín J. Liehm's interviews with Czechoslovak intellectuals from 1970, in which he attributes the failure of socialism in Czechoslova-

constitutional democracy has not proved capable of eliminating external influences, particularly in the economic sphere, and that the current regime provides its radical critics (whether from the left or right) with reason to conclude – not entirely unjustifiably – that Slovakia is merely a vassal state compelled to act in the interests of the Western superpowers, particularly the USA, but also Germany, ‘Brussels’ and others, and is completely defenceless against the will of international corporations.<sup>9</sup> Similar criticism can be found in Poland, Czechia, Hungary and other countries in the region.

Imitation, as we have seen, plays an important role in the book by Krastev and Holmes. It, and particularly their not always entirely balanced interdisciplinary approach, deserves more detailed analysis. However, I limit myself here to the passage in which they criticise the ‘German path’ to democracy as being unsuited to Central and Eastern European countries. Krastev and Holmes claim, referring to Thomas Bagger, that in reality it was not the Americans but the Europeans who believed that liberalism trumped all other ideologies.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Germany was the model for Central and Eastern Europe’s flattering imitation, “because Germany was the ‘champion’ convert to liberal democracy”,<sup>11</sup> and so was sup-

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kia to the mechanical importation of the Soviet model. Referring to Ladislav Novomeský, he concludes that “Czechoslovakia’s present misfortunes stem from its having adopted a ready-made socialism”. Elsewhere in his text he states that “this little binational country, Czechoslovakia, highly industrialized, a hundred times invaded and enslaved, had no model to copy. It was necessary for it to invent its own path, by way of errors surmounted, deviations corrected, distortions set to right—as was to be the case with Cuba fifteen years later—so as to be able one day to recognize itself in its work. The country was spared this trouble. The two great powers each made a contribution: after Yalta, the Marshall Plan. We know what followed. In 1948 the communists took power and the big brother gave its little brother a prefabricated socialism as a gift.” Jean-Paul Sartre “The Socialism That Came in from the Cold”, in *The Politics of Culture*, ed. Antonín J. Liehm (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1970), 5, 7.

9 See, for instance: Luboš Blaha, *The Antiglobalist: A Central European Leftist Perspective*, trans. by Richard Cedzo and others (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019).

10 Ivan Krastev and Holmes Stephen, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, 55.

11 Ibid.

posed to show the post-communist countries how imitation worked. The most basic critical point worth making here in relation to Holmes and Krastev's argument is that these countries did not choose the 'German', or more accurately, the continental route after 1989, in which only neo-liberal political 'extremists' actually doubted the relevance of the social state. Instead, what dominated was a markedly 'American' neoliberal path, which has of course to a large extent taken root globally, leaving negative traces in both Germany and France for instance, i.e. in the core of the European Union.

Holmes and Krastev offer no further detailed explanation but, from what they base their view on, we can conclude that it is a mere generalisation of what is probably an excessively subjective view. I think that when making such weighty statements, well-known experts such these should really offer more in the way of justification. The Bulgarian reality and North American insights probably differ markedly from Czech, Slovak or Polish ones, even if that may not initially seem to be the case. However, it is clear that in the Slovak context the dominant transformation inspiration was the USA,<sup>12</sup> and its neoliberal model – despite that not always being clear when the 'West' is being referenced.<sup>13</sup> Historically, the relationship with Germany, particularly for Poland and Czechia, was so heavily laden it was hard to posit it as the main transformation model, although of course various elements of, for instance, the German constitution and political system were extensively adopted (in Slovakia, Austria was particularly inspirational in the early 1990s). But that was

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12 As Krastev and Holmes are both keen on film references, the popular Czech comedy *Byl jednou jeden polda* (*There Once Was a Cop*), in which the main hero, Major Maisner, obsessively models himself on the American 'Police Academy' films, may serve as a good example. It is not a cinematographic great and its ironic tone cannot be overlooked, but it is absolutely clear which country is being imitated.

13 It is to some degree understandable that in the early 1990s the differences between Western Europe and the USA were not emphasised and that the 'West' came to be used as shorthand. But thirty years on, one would expect Krastev and Holmes to be more cautious in using such an artificial civilisational entity, as it is by no means automatic.

not strongly articulated at the time and certainly did not prevail in the collective memory. After 1989 we did not in fact mentally return to 'Europe', as a large section of the intellectuals and many inhabitants had wished, nor did we develop a deeper interest in what was going on in countries such as Spain, Germany, Italy, France or Sweden for instance. Instead we remained a 'mental satellite' of the USA: from the love of its popular culture, like Hollywood blockbusters, to the minute attention paid to inconsequential aspects of US politics or joining America in its adventures in Iraq and elsewhere, and the obsession with publishing in English and in English language journals indexed in private databases. Again this requires a more lengthy analysis, for I have nothing against the USA as such or publishing in English. I merely wish to state that the authors, Krastev and Holmes, have drawn too heavily on one part of their interpretation, which could have unforeseen consequences in our already confused political and societal situation. Particularly if the potential of democracy were to be seen in terms of the American neoliberal model only and if democracy as a whole were then to be rejected on that basis. And that is indeed already occurring among a not insignificant section of the population.

Of course, both Krastev and Holmes recognise the influence wielded by the United States of America; however, they mention only in passing that there are other factors at play here, "especially the evolution of the globally dominant form of American liberalism from Roosevelt's kinder and gentler New Deal, promising freedom from fear, to Reagan's deregulated market, meant to rattle people, to make them feel insecure at work, to take away their pensions, and so forth".<sup>14</sup> Here too, they blame the Germans, for although Germany is proud of its social state and system of collective decision-making, through which the unions play a key role in company management, no-one was interested in introducing it in Eastern Europe. Krastev and Holmes cast doubt on the official reason for that – that the Eastern Europeans could ill afford it – and speculate that "weakened state protections for Central and Eastern European workers

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14 Ivan Krastev and Holmes Stephen, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, 61.

and citizens would create favourable investment opportunities for German industry".<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, they provide no persuasive evidence for this either. I do not wish to refute the thesis in its entirety, and I have no illusions regarding investors. The vast majority are of course only interested in profitmaking. It is also true that German companies have outsourced large parts of their production to 'cheaper states'. But if you compare employee experiences of German firms in Slovakia and of Slovak firms, one would be hard pressed to conclude that the German ones automatically come off worse, or that German 'capitalists' are worse than Slovak ones. A more detailed empirical study is required; nonetheless, such easy generalisations undermine the authors' ambitions and help foster the general 'confusion' and resentment. Instead of providing a convincing research-based description of social reality, they end up misleading the reader. Equally, opinion in Germany is highly diverse and well-known figures have publicly opposed and criticised the increasingly hegemonic position of Germany in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

The diversity of the German debate (and actions!) may not entirely contradict Krastev and Homes' claims, but it at least problematises such generalisations. Who are the creators and bearers of this new German ideology? Krastev and Holmes have seemingly Jürgen Habermas in mind, although they do not consider his work in any detail and, what's more, they overlook the internal debates within the critical theory of society, in which Habermas's position is far more nuanced, which they sharply criticise and even reject. The accusation that the 'new German ideologists' are reluctant to expand social rights to Eastern Central European states rings hollow. On the contrary, they demand that social rights should apply universally, not just within the European Union. Herein lies the hope that the 'new German ideology' will inspire the Eastern European emancipatory struggles or 'struggles for recognition'. If, however, Krastev

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15 Ibid.

16 See, for instance: Jürgen Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge/Malden: Polity, 2013); Ulrich Beck, *German Europe*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge/Malden: Polity, 2013).

and Holmes are attempting somewhat unsophisticatedly (or indirectly?) to highlight the double-edged nature of German foreign policy, then there are other important arguments and, at the very least, nuances that must be taken into consideration. It is hard to imagine that any scholar of critical theory would hold that it is acceptable that the employee of a global corporation in Romania, let's say, receives a disproportionately lower salary than their equivalent in Germany. Here Krastev and Holmes are missing their target; it is the neoliberally oriented German (and other) philosophers (and politicians) that should set their sights on.<sup>17</sup> In the long-term, one can view post-war Germany as an inspiring project that attempts to balance the liberal, socialist, and conservative elements of society. Of course, and here we can partly agree with Krastev and Holmes, one can ask whether a certain group of German politicians have not lost their moderate outlook and whether part of the political and philosophical spectrum has not defended the liberal cosmopolitan view rather too radically and categorically. To be clear, two things must be distinguished: On the one hand, the point that the neoliberal foreign policy and business practices can in no way be conflated with a normative cosmopolitan vision of universal rights and democratic values. While both share a certain detachment from contexts, they pursue and defend entirely different 'value-orientations'. On the other hand, as I show in the second part, a certain liberal cosmopolitanism does not sufficiently recognize local cultural and national specificities, and does not ground its own normative project sufficiently in an embedded and hermeneutically sensitive appreciation of their demands. To rectify this lack is one of the aims of the essay, as the discussions of Honneth, Delanty and Kögler in the third and fourth part show.

## II.

Martin M. Šimečka, a journalist, the son of a prominent Communist-era dissident and one of the most popular public intellectuals in Slovakia in

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17 The famous controversy between Honneth and Sloterdijk is worth mentioning here, among others.

the post-1989 era, has written a short biographical book titled *Among the Slovaks: A Short History of Indifference from Dubček to Fico, or How I Became a Patriot* [Orig. in Slovak, trans. L.D.]. In it, he contrasts the successful post-1989 history of his family with the fate of the members of a neighbouring family, whose lives did not change under democracy: previously trapped by the communist ban on travelling abroad (primarily) for political reasons, they then become trapped by poverty. Šimečka thereby highlights a key problem, one that has affected him too, and that he now sees in neoliberalism. The problem is with the state, not the economy. He criticises Margaret Thatcher's belief that there is no such thing as society, and argues that society does exist, whatever Thatcher may have thought. Moreover, he thinks that people feel the need to be part of a greater whole. He puts this into the wider context of what is happening in Central Europe today and surmises that "democratic politicians were unable to react to this and so other politicians stepped into the empty space. Viktor Orbán, Jaroslaw Kaczyński, Miloš Zeman and many others, including the Slovak fascist Marián Kotleba, are able to respond to people's desires for values that are not just money-oriented. But they do not do it by showing solidarity and sympathising with the weak and defenceless; instead, they offer hate: against Muslims, Roma, minorities, elites and democracy".<sup>18</sup>

Krastev and Holmes make similar points but are more explicit. With Šimečka it is not entirely clear whether he is willing to recognise particularities and the relative nature of 'boundaries', especially cultural ones, and he seems to fluctuate between the 'radical' and 'moderate' versions of cosmopolitanism. Here one can agree with Holmes and Krastev's critique of criticism of ethnonationalism. It is true that the fight for national self-determination was the key emancipatory struggle for many of the countries east of Germany, and it is not easy to abandon this deeply rooted identity. "Central and Eastern European countries, by contrast, find it difficult to share such a comprehensively negative view of na-

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18 Martin M. Šimečka, *Medzi Slovákmi. Stručné dejiny ľahostajnosti od Dubčeka k Ficovi alebo ako som sa stal vlastencom* (Bratislava: N Press, 2017), 85.

tionism because, first of all, these states were children of the age of nationalism following the break-up of multinational empires after the First World War and, second, because anti-Russian nationalism played an essential role in the basically nonviolent anti-communist revolutions of 1989".<sup>19</sup> Hence, before we can engage in further discussion we really need to resolve the question of how we can get beyond the 'eternal' image of the nation state, which is not capable of responding adequately to the global challenges of the twenty-first century on the one hand, and avoid falling into the trap of 'globalism' that is insensitive to particularities, and consequently provokes harsh and radical reactions on the other.

In this study, I do not intend to enter into the now sizeable debate on Habermas's theory of cosmopolitanism,<sup>20</sup> nor do I attempt to deal with the question of whether his position may in fact accommodate particularist elements. Instead, I focus on another major 'globalist', Ulrich Beck, to whom Axel Honneth's key observation in the conclusion of his book on socialism was aimed. It indicates a key shift in the 'new German ideology', since he urges us to be methodologically careful regarding the discussion about cosmopolitanism. According to him: "...the functionally differentiated social order largely relies on guarantees provided by constitutions and basic rights intended to enable the members of society to shift freely between different roles. As long as constitutional regulations are created and guaranteed by individual sovereign states, it would surely be unwise to refrain entirely from national processes of social differentiation. Ulrich's Beck demand that the 'methodology' of social theory must henceforth be strictly cosmopolitan is far too hasty, because it fails to take into account the degree to which major segments of social reality continue to be determined by national systems of rules".<sup>21</sup> The critique

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19 Ivan Krastev and Holmes Stephen, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, 59. To this point see also, for instance: Robert Fine, *Cosmopolitanism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 51.

20 Robert Fine's commentary from his book *Cosmopolitanism* would be one of my preferable points of departure.

21 Honneth, Axel, *The Idea of Socialism. Towards a Renewal*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge/Malden: Polity, 2017, 100).



of 'methodological nationalism' clearly has both theoretical and practical limitations. When not understood properly, it can lead to the opposite extreme, the rejection or overlooking of what is perhaps the most characteristic feature of modernity, the emergence of the nation state.<sup>22</sup> Both the term methodological nationalism and critique thereof have become popular in recent decades in connection with Ulrich Beck's work. Beck considers the basic characteristic of methodological nationalism to be that society and state are considered to be one and the same thing, both as they are organised and experienced – which is the defining characteristic of the first modernity. It assumes a state and political fixation and control of the space: "The territorial state became the 'container' of society. Or, to put it in another way, the state's claim to exercise power and control was the foundation of society. This primacy of the national can and should be analysed in respect of the various basic rights, the education system, social policy, the party landscape, taxes, language, history, literature, transport, infrastructure, passport and frontier controls, and so on".<sup>23</sup>

According to Beck, nation-state societies thereby create and preserve a quasi-essentialist identity in everyday life. He then points out that the system of nation states is collapsing, which is something many other scholars agree on.<sup>24</sup> Beck is really very persuasive about many things – in

22 According to Krastev and Holmes, "the most effective human rights organization in the world is the liberal nation-state". Ivan Krastev and Holmes Stephen, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, 58.

23 Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge/Malden: Polity, 2000), 77. At another place in his book he complements: "[i]nternal homogeneity is essentially a creation of state control. All kinds of social practices – production, culture, language, labour market, capital, education – stamped and standardized, defined and rationalized, by the national state, but at least are labelled as national economy, national language, literature, public life, history, and so on. The state establishes a territorial unit as a 'container', in which statistics are systematically collected about economic and social processes and situations. In this way, the categories of the state's self-observation become the categories of empirical social science, so that sociological definitions of reality confirm those of bureaucracy" (Ibid., 33-34).

24 In the critical theory context, see e.g.: Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge/Malden: Polity,

light of his arguments, one would be hard pressed to find any right-minded person who could defend the proposition that we live in or could live in the same nation states that dominated in the twentieth century. He definitely deserves respect for opening those important horizons and it is necessary to avoid any kind of a *nation-state reification*.<sup>25</sup> However, the question still remains as to whether Beck's 'methodological cosmopolitanism' did not 'throw the baby out with the bath water' and painted an excessive picture of globalisation and global capitalism that portrays everything as being the result of the independent efforts of forces lying outside the reach of states, over which national publics have either no or very little influence.

Like every 'great' scholar, Beck's work has been criticised from various positions, for instance by critics of the critique of methodological nationalism, and therefore of Beck's theory, developed by the afore-mentioned

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2000); Nancy Fraser, "Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World," *New Left Review* 36, (Nov-Dec 2005).

25 With reference to this point William I. Robinson states: "Because of the prevalence of reification in discussions of the state and other social phenomena, it is important to make clear what I mean by *reification*. To reify is to understand something that social agency has produced as though it exists and operates quite independently of this agency, according to its own laws. It is to perceive a social practice that we engage in as some external 'thing' that exists on its own. To reify something is to attribute a thing-like status to what should be more properly seen as a complex, changing set of social relations that our practice has created. The problem is that the social world is so complex and multidimensional that we must create numerous concepts to try to describe, codify, and understand its varied dimensions. Thus, 'society,' 'race,' 'culture,' 'identity,' 'state,' and 'nation-state' are concepts we have created to help us understand reality. They have no ontological status independent of human agency. But when we forget that the reality to which these concepts refer is our own sets of social relations and instead attribute some independent existence to them, we are reifying. For instance, a 'nation-state' is not a tangible 'thing' insofar as borders are imaginary lines we draw through real space. A 'state' is not, of course, the physical buildings that house government officials or a capital city but a set of social relations and practices we have created and institutionalized. To see the state as something in itself is to reify the state" William I. Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism. Production, Class, and State in a Transnational World* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 90-91.

Robert Fine. The latter claims that Beck attributes too much to methodological nationalism when stating that "it did once have a historical validity".<sup>26</sup> Referring to the most important theorists of society such as Durkheim, Marx, Weber and Simmel, he highlights the ambiguities in this stance and shows that these authors went beyond the national framework. In this respect, he accuses Beck of 'presentism'.<sup>27</sup> Another well-known sociologist, Johann P. Arnason, points out in a more general thesis, i.e. not directly referring to Beck, that while it is true that the term society is marked by an excessive focus on the nation state and its integrationist strategies and that one often hears talk of the 'methodological nationalism' of modern sociology in this context, it is in fact a misleading term: "it was, as even the critics agree, the unconscious projection of historical trends, not a methodological choice" [Orig. in Czech, trans. L.D.].<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, when thinking about the various framings that must be considered when analysing modernity, Arnason states that "nation states unquestionably belong to such a framework. It is true that the traditional focus on nation states in the humanities and social sciences (explicit amongst historians, and less so amongst sociologists) has in recent decades been subjected to substantial criticism and attempts have been made at broad-stroke descriptions of the nation state as a referential framework (compressed into the at times excessively popular keywords of globalisation, cosmopolitanism, transnationalism etc); nonetheless, there is good reason to insist that it would be ill-advised to go to the other extreme and that one would do better to seek a balanced interpretation of the changing relationships between nation states and larger formations. And that there is no denying that, within the limits of the nation state, modern institutions and cultural orientations often develop in a specific way" [Orig. in Czech, trans. L.D.].<sup>29</sup>

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26 Robert Fine, *Cosmopolitanism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 11.

27 *Ibid.*, 9.

28 Johann P. Arnason, *Civilizační analýza. Evropa a Asie opět na rozcestí* [Civilization analysis. Europe and Asia again at the crossroads] (Prague: Filosofia, 2009), 9.

29 Johann P. Arnason, *Modernita jako nová civilizace: jednota a rozrůznění* [Modernity as a New Civilization: Unity and Differentiation]. In *Moderni-*

In this context, it is perhaps worth touching on the issue of migration, which seems to have definitively ‘split’ Europe into ‘Old’ and ‘New’, with the Visegrad Four countries in particular rejecting the compulsory allocation of migrants. First there is the ‘classic’ political philosophy of John Rawls, whose views on the purpose of borders is worth a mention. This attempt to draw attention to his last major work *The Law of Peoples* should be seen merely as an attempt to stimulate further discussion.<sup>30</sup> In paragraph 4.3 of ‘The Role of Boundaries’ he states: “An important role of a people’s government, however arbitrary a society’s boundaries may appear from a historical point of view, is to be the representative and effective agent of a people as they take responsibility for their territory and its environmental integrity, as well as for the size of their population. As I see it the point of the institution of property is that, unless a definite agent is given responsibility for maintaining an asset and bears the loss for not doing so, that asset tends to deteriorate. In this case the asset is the peoples territory and its capacity to support them in perpetuity; and the agent is the people themselves as politically organized. [...] ...they are to recognize that they cannot make up for their irresponsibility in caring for their land and its natural resources by conquest in war or by migrating<sup>31</sup> into other people’s territory without their consent”.<sup>32</sup> He then goes on to

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*ta/modernity v eurasijských kulturních a civilizačních kontextech* [Modernity/ Modernities in Eurasian Cultural and Civilizational Contexts], ed. Milan Kreuzzieger and Ondřej Lánský (Prague: Filosofia, 2016), 39.

- 30 One should not of course consider John Rawls as the indisputable authority, and the sheer volume of critical responses to Rawls has now reached an almost unassailable height. Robert Fine in his comments on *The Law of Peoples* states: “There is something parochial about an analysis in which Rawls sometimes displays an alarming lack of awareness of the workings of the global economy. For instance, in his discussion of ‘burdened societies’ he attributes the failure to develop stable and minimally just regimes to a lack of political will and cultural resources and appears to neglect the role of *external factors* in contributing to the state of a nation’s internal affairs”. Robert Fine, *Cosmopolitanism*, 66. Fine definitely has a point, nevertheless I, by using Rawls, aim at a general argument.
- 31 I will leave to one side the issue of whether the migration and refugee crisis of 2015 comes under Rawls’ description of ‘failing to regulate their numbers’.
- 32 John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples with “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited”* (Cam-

say – in a footnote – that “[t]his remark implies that a people has at least a qualified right to limit immigration”. Among the reasons for restricting immigration, Rawls talks of protecting the nation’s political culture and its constitutional principles. The second half of this footnote by Rawls in which he quotes Michael Walzer is also important: „To tear down the walls of the state is not, as Sidgwick worriedly suggested, to create a world without walls, but rather to create a thousand petty fortresses”.<sup>33</sup> The Slovak Republic and other countries in the region – despite the frequent and almost ‘pathological’ criticism emanating from a significant section of the population both at home and abroad – have a relatively high standard of living in terms of ‘life without walls’, i.e. with no ‘gated communities’ or ‘no-go areas’, especially when compared with countries like the United States, which has long been a model for those countries. Of course the fact remains that the normative validity of those states lies precisely in enabling also certain universal human rights, which makes it clear that such a defence of nation-states cannot be used for an ethno-national defence of ‘closed borders’ per se.

Rawls’s footnote citing Walzer continues, with Rawls emphasising the power the strongest player in global capitalism can exert: „The fortresses, too, can be torn down: all that is necessary is a global state sufficiently powerful to overwhelm the local communities. Then the result would be the world of the political economist, as Sidgwick described it [or of global capitalism, I might add – i.e. John Rawls]—a world of deracinated men and women”.<sup>34</sup> Here we come back to Šimečka’s remark at the beginning of this section where he talks about the human desire for values that

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bridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 38–39.

33 Ibid., 39. It is worth noting here an observation Krastev and Holmes make right at the beginning of their book: “When the Berlin Wall was toppled, there were only sixteen border fences in the world. Now there are sixty-five fortified perimeters either completed or under construction”. With reference to Quebec University expert Elisabeth Vallet, they state that a third of the world’s countries are constructing barriers along their borders. Ivan Krastev and Holmes Stephen, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, 2.

34 John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples with “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited”*, 39.

cannot be expressed in monetary terms. Being part of a cultural world is a strong motivation that cannot easily be pushed to one side or declared irrelevant. Apart from the practical reasons such as the stability and predictability of social phenomena, 'being rooted' in a particular cultural world (which still includes being part of a specific ethnicity in Central Europe yet) often gives meaning to one's existence.

### III.

Criticism of ethnonationalism was dominant in Germany after the second world war, for obvious reasons. Holmes and Krastev cannot be read in the same way, but rather as a variation along a similar line of thinking, as expressed above in the Honneth quote: they state that "[i]n Eastern Europe, for historical reasons, nationalism and liberalism are more likely to be viewed as mutually supportive than as mutually exclusive".<sup>35</sup> Of course one has to read Honneth as a whole and not reduce to it to a single fragment. For Honneth did not entirely reject Beck's thesis but spoke of such steps as premature. As has so often in history been the case, the solution appears to lie somewhere in the middle. Between the radical globalists and the eternal nationalists there is undoubtedly a 'third way', and in the remainder of this paper I shall attempt to outline it.

In the introduction to *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, Honneth explains his own theory of justice which he sees as an *Analysis of Society*. He criticises contemporary political philosophy for having become decoupled from the analysis of society and fixated on purely normative principles, by which he means the theories that draw on Kant and, in the English speaking world, Locke. Honneth's theory of justice is based on four premises: "a *first* premise, assume that the given form of social reproduction in society is determined by shared universal values and ideals. The aims of both social production and cultural integration are ultimately regulated by norms that are ethical in the sense that they embody conceptions of shared goods. The *second* premise claims, as

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35 Ivan Krastev and Holmes Stephen, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, 59.

a first approximation, that the concept of justice cannot be understood in isolation from these overarching social values; social practices and institutions are 'just' to the extent that they are capable of realizing generally accepted values. Only with the *third* premise do we have a more detailed definition of what it means to develop a theory of justice on the basis of an analysis of society: Out of the diversity of social reality, we select – or to put it in methodological terms, we normatively reconstruct – those institutions and practices that are truly capable of securing and realizing general values. Finally, the *fourth* premise should guarantee that in applying this methodological procedure we do not merely affirm existing instances of ethical life".<sup>36</sup> This whole process is intended to lead to greater freedom, that is to make a critique of improper shared values possible. Nevertheless, normative judgments should not have a categorical form but rather a gradual one.

Honneth's theory of justice elaborates his theory of recognition, which provides a methodical means of opening up the critical theory of society and going beyond its Western European framework, including, among other things, its limitations vis-à-vis Jürgen Habermas. According to Honneth, as Marek Hrubec surmises, social critique did not emerge primarily because people could see the gap between reality and established norms of consensual communicative action, but because in practice they were breaking the social norms they had acquired during socialisation.<sup>37</sup> Honneth assumes that all forms of social integration depend on certain forms of mutual recognition, which connect injustices to feelings of misrecognition which can be understood as impulses for social change. Social suffering and discontent, therefore, possess a normative core: "It is a matter of the disappointment or violation of normative expectations of society considered justified by those concerned. Thus, such feelings of discontent and suffering, insofar as they are designated as "social",

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36 Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 10.

37 Marek Hrubec et al, *Etika sociální konfliktů. Axel Honneth a kritická teorie uznání* [The Ethics of Social Conflicts. Axel Honneth and the Critical Theory of Recognition] (Prague: Filosofía 2012), 18-19.

coincide with the experience that society is doing something unjust, something unjustifiable".<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, it is impossible to define what is just or unjust ahistorically, independently of social analysis, as Honneth reminds us in his critique of the theory of justice, drawing on Kant and Locke respectively. However, since Honneth is mainly interested in the West, he has little to say about the 'struggle(s) for recognition' in countries that lie outside his sphere of interest – such as those in Central and Eastern Europe. Ultimately, then, the results of his investigations are not that different from Habermas's conclusions, despite the different reasoning.<sup>39</sup> Habermas's position as presented in 'What Does Socialism Mean Today' is an example.<sup>40</sup> Here one can point out that Habermas, despite justified criticism of the real socialist regimes and the many relevant arguments he makes, in fact rejects the idea that these regimes were in any way genuine – probably because he over-generalises the experiences of the German Democratic Republic. Habermas also expected the Eastern European countries to automatically follow the 'direction of the West', which was only partly the case. Insofar as the topic of this study is concerned, this view of reality weighs heavily on the normative aspects of the

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38 Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or recognition? A political-philosophical exchange*, trans. Joel Galb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke (London-New York: Verso, 2004), 129.

39 A more detailed discussion of the differences between Habermas and Honneth is required but is beyond the scope of this study. To simplify somewhat, one can, however, say that Honneth's research into social reality leads us into a (normative reconstructive) analysis of social development in Germany, France, Great Britain and the USA, from the social processes that led to the American War of Independence and the French Revolution to present day Europe and North America, covering the last three hundred years or so, as one of his last book once again shows: Axel Honneth, *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). The potential offered by his theory of recognition of the early 1990s, albeit restricted to comparisons of Western and non-Western philosophical theories and to an intercultural dialogue about global justice, remain largely unexploited.

40 Jürgen Habermas, "What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left," *New Left Review* 183, (Sep-Oct 1990).



debate, and consequently makes it hard to grasp that much of the institutional setting, which does not correspond to the way Western countries evolved, is not necessarily down to the 'ill will' of rulers, but emerged randomly or out of traditional entities; rarely was this a conscious and rational response to the specific challenges facing these societies at that particular time and in that space. Regarding the socialist countries, one can draw on a study by Gáspár M. Tamás, who is generally very critical of the real socialist regime (and rightly so), in which he points out that one of the greatest achievements of these Eastern European regimes was to put on end to the 'caste' society.<sup>41</sup> These days, of course, one can only speculate as to how the situation would have evolved had the historical

41 "... Soviet-style state capitalism has changed things enormously, therefore the widespread analogies with Tsardom (so popular even in respectable historiography and political science produced by the faux naïfs) are ridiculous. Bolshevik rule has accomplished many of the customary goals of bourgeois revolutions: industrialisation, urbanisation, secularisation, compulsory comprehensive education, magnanimous financing of art, science, technology, eradication of tribalism, edification of a gigantic infrastructure (railways, motorways, pipelines) and, perhaps most significantly, the relocation of the peasant population from mud huts into what is called in England 'council estates', in the US 'housing projects', in France HLMs but on an enormous scale. The 'council estates' of reinforced concrete in a desolate grey are still adored by the majority of East Europeans. They had been their way out of a peasant past, out of the old dispensation that by 1917 was so hated as no other known social and political system in world history. This is something which is all too frequently forgotten. The Hungarian expression for peasant, *paraszt*, comes from a Slavonic word meaning 'simpleton', the English 'villain', the French *vilain* comes from the late Latin *villanus*, meaning 'a villager', 'a rustic'. Contempt for the 'ignoble' (originally meaning simply a commoner) in an agrarian caste society is unimaginable in our comparatively egalitarian world. Most people's grandparents in Eastern Europe were routinely slapped and kicked by landowners' agents, by the foremen and by gendarmes after which they had to kiss the hand that slapped them. The first president of the Hungarian republic in 1918, the revolutionary Count de Károlyi, one of the richest magnates in the Empire, was first seriously moved to betray his aristocratic caste when he discovered after a satisfying shoot that in the hunting lodge of his obliging noble cousin each guest found in his bed a shivering naked Rumanian village girl, like nowadays the complimentary chocolate in hotels". Gáspár M. Tamás, "A Capitalism Pure and Simple," *Grundrisse, Zeitschrift für linke Theorie & Debatte*, accessed August 25, 2021, <http://grundrisse.net/grundrisse22/aCapitalismPurAndSimple.htm>.

experiment not taken place. Nonetheless, one can quite legitimately ask whether, had it not been for the 'real-existing' socialist regimes, the Soviet-bloc countries would not more closely resemble Latin American countries today. They would of course differ – much like Chile differs from Honduras or Brazil from Haiti – but would exhibit similar social problems and possibly even have favelas like Rio de Janeiro or other South American metropolises do. One can also ask whether Clerical-fascist or other Catholic, Orthodox or Islamic 'theocracies', not altogether dissimilar from that we know from the past or from other parts of the world, might have emerged. There is not enough space here to entertain these speculations in more detail or briefly consider the concept of accelerated modernisation,<sup>42</sup> or even whether certain regions of Latin America and Eastern Europe have come to resemble one another more closely (economically, socially, politically...). Insofar as non-European countries are concerned, one can discuss Kemalism, which is an excellent example of modernisation for countries rooted in civilisational heritages other than Western ones, or the various African freedom movements, Latin American emancipation attempts and so on.

Habermas's position can seem all the more paradoxical given that he was attempting to produce a critical hermeneutic theory applicable to various 'contexts'. In this respect, Gerard Delanty pointed out that while it still makes sense to continue the critical hermeneutic project of the 'creator' of the 'new German ideology', "[t]he tendency in his thought more recently is towards a position that simply posits that people can transcend cultural contexts of particularity to engage in discursive dialogue that is free from culturally specific limits. From the perspective of democratic theory this is no doubt interesting and important, but from the point of view of a social theory of civilizational encounters and the search for a wider cosmopolitanism it leaves unresolved the question as

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42 Dieter Senghaas' book *The European Experience. A Historical Critique of Development Theory*, trans. K.H. Kimmig (Leamington Spa/Dover, New Hampshire: Berg Publishers, 1985), for instance, may still offer some important impulses for further discussion.

to the cultural foundations of inter-civilizational encounters".<sup>43</sup> Delanty, drawing on the work of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and abovementioned Johann P. Arnason, talks of there being three civilisations in Europe, the Western Judaeo-Christian, Russian-Slavic and Islamic Turkish civilizations.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the existence of the communist regimes, as one version of Western modernity, elicited other key regional societal transformations that cannot easily be ignored (Arnason). And, as theorists of the future 'new European ideology' would do well to bear in mind, it is important to be aware of this as it affects countries spawned from different contexts and with different roots.

That does not, of course, mean that their citizens cannot step back from their own traditions or that in many ways their values are radically different from those in Germany, for instance. Indeed, what the nation-state emphasis or civilizational approach—if it does not just want to fall prey to a 'philosophy of history' or middle-level macro approach—needs is also a reconstruction of the concrete agent-based capabilities that allow situated subjects to reflexively appropriate, i.e. to both continue and transform their traditions (which they value, as emphasized at the end of the second part). In order to avoid a new macro-level thinking (just a little lower than the totally abstracted globalism), we need to show how agents actually appropriate their own background contexts and traditions. In the next section, I therefore turn to the issue of a reconstruction of the hermeneutic background and associated capabilities. By showing that such a mediation is what happens when agents understand themselves, others, and the world—including the universal aspirations of values and rights—any orientation towards such allegedly 'abstract' values is de facto embedded in contextual assumptions and practices.

Nevertheless, a truly dialogic position, one that is not merely critical but primarily hermeneutic, has to recognise that progressive changes

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43 Gerard Delanty, "Civilizational constellations and European modernity reconsidered," in *Europe and Asia Beyond East and West*, ed. Gerard Delanty (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 51-52.

44 *Ibid.*, 55.

often requires decades and sometimes do not happen at all. Therefore, a different perspective, if in certain reasonable frames (as a matter of course, there is no way to accept such extreme evils as for instance genocide or slavery), does not immediately deserve hatred, condemnation and contempt. Moreover, dialogical openness has to mean accepting that these 'new' member states may have adequately grasped the issue and so Western countries should avoid engaging in arrogant tutelage. The same applies to intracultural discussions, particularly where progressive citizens and activists are not always sufficiently capable of avoiding adopting positions 'from on high', which can elicit hateful reactions among the more conservative sections of society. And this of course is not merely a problem in Eastern European countries.

#### IV.

There has fortunately been a theoretical shift in cosmopolitan theories towards a post-universal cosmopolitanism, which as Gerard Delanty points out, is "critical and dialogic with diversity as the goal rather than the creation of a universal order, such as a cosmopolis."<sup>45</sup> This represents a promising starting point for a future dialogical solution to existing problems. In what is left of this paper, I will therefore briefly turn to the work of Hans-Herbert Kögler, whose critical hermeneutics is, I think, an important update to the work of Habermas, and can be labelled 'critical hermeneutics 2.0'. A reconstruction of Kögler's critical hermeneutics bring us to core tenets of critical interpretation as conditions of understanding, ultimately building on a hermeneutic theory of cultural evolution. Such a theory is suggested via a social ontology that entails the core tenets of the hermeneutical situation, i.e. our basic ontological constitution as interpreting beings, including an unavoidable reliance of assumptions and capacities regarding reflexive agency and dialogic recognition, which thus allows for a situated account of cosmopolitan self-understanding as well as a pluralistic conception of truth as disclosure.<sup>46</sup> This is

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45 Ibid., 53.

46 For more details, see: Lubomír Dunaj and Kurt, C.M. Mertel (eds.), *Hans-Herbert*

not to negate other attempts at a critical hermeneutics, nor to label them irrelevant. I simply wish to stress the direct link between Kögler and the German setting and to introduce this highly relevant theorist as evidence of the plurality within critical theory, and thereby within German discourse, that Krastev and Holmes do not take sufficiently into account.

Kögler has correctly identified the path for further research, when he claims that “what emerges here is a whole new domain of research for critical social theory, which abandons the role of pre-determining which values or norms to adopt, and rather assumes the role of the critical analyst that observes the extent to which the relevant background capacities for participation in the intercultural public sphere are sufficiently articulated. Two tasks go hand in hand in this respect: the reconstruction of linguistic, psychological, cognitive and cultural resources that are necessary to develop those capabilities for a rational public dialogue, and the critical analysis of those power-infused modes of reasoning that prevent a non-foundationalist norm-commitment, interpretive perspective-taking and the development of a critical social reflexivity vis-à-vis socially situated values and norms. Critical theory will thus be an indispensable help for the rational enactment of a cosmopolitan public sphere as it provides us with normatively articulated and empirically observable standards to which any intercultural dialogue will have to conform.”<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, although it is a very promising approach, which is also demonstrated by Kögler’s attempt to bring critical theory and cultural studies into a fruitful dialogue,<sup>48</sup> he does mainly focus on the socio-cognitive and cultural social resources for reflexive agency and cultural appropriation; as such, his own work does not itself establish yet a robust dialogue with other

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*Kögler’s Critical Hermeneutics* (London: Bloomsbury 2022) (forthcoming).

47 Hans-Herbert Kögler, “Constructing a Cosmopolitan Public Sphere. Hermeneutic Capabilities and Universal Values,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 8(3) (August 2005), 317.

48 Hans-Herbert Kögler, “A Critical Hermeneutics of Agency: Cultural Studies as Critical Theory,” in *Hermeneutic Philosophies of Social Science*, ed. Babette Babich (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 63 - 88.

civilizations by way of intercultural and comparative philosophy.<sup>49</sup> But neither does critical theory's mainstream. However, this is not the place to dwell further on it, because the aim of this paper is to list some of the arguments showing why such a shift in the debate on critical hermeneutics is needed. In the next few lines I shall merely cover some of the more important points for a critical theory's global learning process, which clear the path towards an intra- and inter-cultural reconciliation both within the EU and beyond.

Such an attempt should focus on the reconstruction of theoretical resources within critical social theory, which are able to deal with concrete forms of suffering and injustice in an increasingly globalized world. Three theorists are considered be of particular importance: Axel Honneth, Hans-Herbert Kögler, and Johann P. Arnason, all of them wrote their dissertation under the supervision of Jürgen Habermas and engaged critically with his work. If we consider each approach from the perspective of their relevance for the development of a 'global learning process', three crucial aspects may be identified. First, sensibility for social suffering and discontent are considered the driving forces for normative change (Honneth). However, such sensibility for social suffering is highly particular or context-sensitive. Consequently, it is required to develop an interpretative approach, such as critical hermeneutics, whose focus on 'social situatedness' (esp. in language and tradition) and 'social context' (esp. of

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49 However, it should be noted that Kögler's work derives from an in-depth engagement of anthropological experiences of the 20th Century [see Hans-Herbert Kögler, *The Power of Dialogue: Critical Hermeneutics after Gadamer and Foucault*,<sup>5</sup> trans. Paul Hendrickson (Cambridge: The MIT Press 1996) and Hans-Herbert Kögler, "Empathy, Dialogue, Critique: How Should We Understand (Inter)Cultural Violence?" in *The Agon of Interpretations. Towards a Critical Intercultural Hermeneutics* ed. Ming Xie, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014)], as well as increasingly from reflections on the axial age discourse as a new pluralized platform of intercultural dialogue. The reconstruction of hermeneutic capabilities and resources thus assumes from the get-go a pluralized and diversified cultural background context. Basically, however, Kögler's main focus has been on the quasi-transcendental conditions of dialogue, while always emphasizing the intrinsic relationship that such a meta-level of analysis has to maintain with concrete empirical intercultural dialogues.

conventions, practices, and institutions) takes into account relations of power and social control, which enables us to recognize certain forms of suffering and discontent (Kögler). These two aspects have to be supplemented by a third: it is necessary to analyse the aforementioned relations of power and social control from a greater historical perspective, from the perspective of a 'civilizational analysis', which tries to understand ontological and/or cosmological frameworks that are supposed to guide whole civilizations over long periods of time (Arnason).

These three theoretical approaches above are all limited in the sense that they are either confined to speaking more about a 'meta-level' of analysis, i.e. they offer tools for identifying certain generic forms of suffering rather than particular instances or, as it is especially the case with Honneth's approach, their social analyses are restricted to Western societies. Nevertheless, there exists already certain attempts to open critical theory towards discussing concrete non-Western social-philosophical and ethical concepts and to bring them into an inter- or transcultural context.<sup>50</sup> While a deep and genuine *Auseinandersetzung* with East-Central and Eastern Europe (similar to that of Krastev and Holmes but deploying terms, approaches and perspectives of critical theory) remains still missing, there is reason to be optimistic of the prospects of a 'civilizational' update of critical hermeneutics and of the critical theory tradition as a whole.

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50 For instance with regard to China and Chinese Philosophy see for example the work of Heiner Roetz or Fabian Heubel.

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# Neo-Gramscian interpretations on ideas, institutions, and hegemony

Sanjay Ramesh<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Gramsci's ideas have provided a resource for many different thinkers across the latter half of the twentieth century. While much focus has been placed on the works of various Marxist and Gramscian thinkers, this paper will argue that the real vitality of neo-Gramscian approaches lies in the works of Robert Cox, Kees van der Pijl, and Stephen Gill. In the early 1980s, Robert Cox applied neo-Gramscian critical analysis to international studies by emphasising the role of ideas, institutions, and culture in the making of the global order. The Coxian epistemology was extended and enriched by Kees van der Pijl and Stephen Gill who analysed social and historical forces that shaped various capitalist systems. For van der Pijl, the Atlantic ruling class was central to his analysis of European capitalism whilst Stephen Gill focused on the roles of transnational capitalism and capitalist economic social forces in shaping the global political economy. Other scholars such as Randolph Persaud questioned the silence of ethnicity in neo-Gramscian approaches and lobbied for its inclusion, and Hannes Lacher and Owen Worth emphasised the limitations of the Coxian approach as focused entirely on the North American political experience and not incorporating from other political discourses of the South and less developed nations. The critics of the neo-Gramscian school argue that the works of Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau are largely unreferenced because they do not fit neatly into the anti-globalist rhetoric of the neo-Gramscian scholarship. The article, however, emphasises that neo-Gramscian approaches can be utilised to study US technological hegemony and Chinese counter-hegemony and its consequences.

## Introduction

The role of the state in shaping political discourse remains an important and pervasive pillar of statecraft and political inquiry because the state is seen as an encompassing entity that embodies the will of the people and as a result a legitimate body politic. The state-centric

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approaches in the traditional settings of political science and international relations have focused on state dynamics of power politics, ideas, institutions, and culture, and using various theoretical approaches, various theorists attempted to understand the role of state actors in shaping domestic and international affairs<sup>2</sup> as discrepant narratives on power and privilege. In this regard, the role of powerful social forces, elite and dominant classes, or in the Gramscian sense<sup>3</sup> hegemonic forces and elite historic-blocs shape international and domestic political orders in unique and often problematic ways, creating new social ontology and reflexivity in the process, and above all, capitalist ideas ensure the primacy of bourgeoisie narratives in both national and global political discourses. However, since the early 1980s, a reinterpretation of the work of the Italian scholar, Antonio Gramsci, has allowed for the establishment of multiple level counter elite epistemologies for conceptualising the analysis of the state, and in particular hegemonic historic blocs that continues to shape capitalist ideology, culture and institutions. However, intra-state social, political, and economic dynamics allow for deeper analysis of social and historical forces, creating critical discourse and reflection on

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- 2 Tim Dunne & Christian Reus-Smut editors, *The Globalisation of International Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Allister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin & Laura Roselle editors, *Forging Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Robert Jackson and Georg Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches, 3rd Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Andy Knight and Tom Keating, *Global Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010); Jonathan D. Caverley Power and Democratic Weakness: Neoconservatism and Neoclassical Realism, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 38, 2010, pp. 593-614; Francis Fukuyama, “The end of History: After the Battle of Jena,” *Quadrant*, Vol. 34, No. 8, 1989, pp.15-25; Kenneth Waltz, The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. XVII, No. 4, 1988, pp. 615-628; Robert O. Keohane, editor, *Neorealism and Its Critics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
  - 3 Robert Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol 12, No.2, 1983, pp. 162-175; Robert Cox, “Civilizations and the Twenty-First Century: some theoretical considerations,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 1, No.1, 2001, pp. 105-130.

the terrains of political power, civil society activism, public policy, social mobilisation, political tactics, social forces, and counter-hegemony. It is here that neo-Gramscian scholarship has left an indelible mark, traversing the traditional restrictions of international affairs and state-centric analytical paradigms of explaining the state without human activity<sup>4</sup> as the new normal in global political and international affairs. In this paper, I will discuss the role of neo-Gramscians in the study of global order, social forces, and counter-elite politics, and social narratives on ideas, institutions, and culture since the 1980s. The neo-Gramscian scholarship serves as a reference point for critical reasoning based on problematising capitalist social and historical forces as both local and global expressions of domination and agitation, control and resistance, and in-group and inter-group struggles. More importantly, these social forces are caught in dialectical historical field forces where both dominant elite groups and anti-elite forces use strategy, tactics, and connective action<sup>5</sup> to critique political authority.

It is important, therefore, to understand the capitalist historic bloc and in particular how ideas against capitalist historical and social forces were critiqued and problematised by the neo-Gramscians in the early 1980s.

### **Understanding historic blocs**

Kees Van der Pijl from the Amsterdam School notes that between 1991 and 2004, there were some 386 academic papers written using Gramsci's ideas and as a result, the "application of Gramsci's ideas is no longer confined to Italian studies and political philosophy but runs across the social sciences."<sup>6</sup> Questions about power and the role of the ruling classes in determining social and economic development and under-development

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4 Colin Wight, State Agency: social action without human activity, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 30, 2004, pp. 269-280.

5 W. Lance Bennett & Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

6 Kees Van der Pijl, "Gramsci and Left Managerialism," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2005, p. 508-509.

led many Marxist theoreticians to re-analyse the work of Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci, who critically looked at the concepts of “ideas”, “institutions” and “culture,” which were inter-connected in a psycho-physical nexus of elite political hegemony and control. In such an interwoven context, Gramsci defended cultural logic and critical thinking and re-theorised culture:

Culture is something quite different. It is the organisation, discipline of one’s inner self, a coming of terms with one’s personality; it is the attainment of higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one’s historical value, one’s function in life, one’s rights and obligations.<sup>7</sup>

The role played by ideas and culture in hegemonic formations was important in understanding the complex political realm where the elite ideology and power converged to create dominant social and institutional narratives on social and cultural forces. What Gramsci was doing was moving away from Marx’s mode of production and the dialectical tensions between capital and labour and basing his political ideas on the philosophy of European historical materialism on developing epistemic links between theory and practice, and on social forces and history. In his conceptualisation of the political realm, Gramsci theorised that human beings acquired consciousness of structural conflicts on the level of political ideologies which enabled class consciousness and mobilisation. From this, he argued that the theoretical-ideological principles of hegemony have epistemological significance, in the sense that knowledge is not only based on idealism but also pragmatism and practical applications of ideas, institutions, and culture. In Gramscian terms, “the realisation of a hegemonic apparatus determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge”<sup>8</sup> that are based on elite and capitalist political structures and founded on domination, subjugation, and class conflict. Domination of the elite was possible due to the engineering of political,

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7 David Forgacs editor, *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), p.57.

8 Louis Marks editor, *Opere di Antonio Gramsci, Vol. 1-6*, (Turin: Einaudi Press, 1957).

economic, and social systems which were founded on the exploitative capabilities of capital.

In many respects, the co-opted weaker proletariat classes became victims of the bourgeoisie system “of alliances which forged a petit-bourgeoisie stratum within the working class, with a vested interest in the established order.”<sup>9</sup> For Gramsci, the state and the political regime in Italy, in particular, as a result of the elite historical discourses, where ‘northern capitalists bureaucratically superimposed themselves over the central and southern agricultural classes.’<sup>10</sup> The dynamics of Italian politics provided Gramsci to question the evolution of the dominant classes of the Italian state and the regional social and cultural forces that permitted the formation, perpetuation, and continuation of inequality, class exploitation, and elitism. In firming up his theoretical and ideological foundations, Gramsci utilised the political pragmatism of Benedetto Croce, who criticised the Marxist mode of production as an idealistic economic discourse on class exploitation based on the dialectical reasoning of the late nineteenth century European Marxism and encouraged a more robust debate on the political superstructure. Whilst Croce influenced Gramsci on his conceptualisation of power and politics and class domination, it is at times hard to identify Gramsci’s political position because of his constant revisions of his ideas in the *Prison Notebooks*.

For Gramsci, the survivability of a historic bloc rests very much upon the skills of organic intellectuals and this bloc is in crisis should it alienate the civil society, in particular, the proletariat and the working classes, and give rise to both social and revolutionary consciousness that will lead to mass protests and civil disorder that will undermine the legitimacy of the elite and the bourgeois state. The Gramscian alliances of social forces or historic blocs are essentially like biological organisms, which are “rendered concrete by the politic-ethical form”<sup>11</sup> but one that

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9 Filippini, Michele, and Patrick J. Barr. *Using Gramsci: A New Approach*. (London: Pluto Press, 2017), p.59.

10 Ibid, p.59

11 Giuseppe Cospito, Adrianna Ponzini translator, *The Rhythm of Thought in*

could not be conceptualised outside its material and practical content. Gramsci's historic bloc has three interrelated elements "economic, political-ideological and historical"<sup>12</sup> and these three elements shape historical activities and events, including future histories, hegemony, and counter-hegemony.

Stephen Gill in his conceptualisation of the Gramscian historic bloc argues that "the Gramscian approach explains the nature of the state in terms of the complexity of state-civil society relations and shows how the nature of state power is related to the strength of the dynamic synthesis between the key forces in the economy and society, operating politically on an inclusive basis. The synthesis between these forces creates what Gramsci called a historic bloc, which may at times have the potential to become hegemonic,"<sup>13</sup> and according to Jim Igoe, Katja Neves, and Dan Brockington, "the historic bloc refers to a historic period in which groups who share particular interests come together to form a distinctly dominant class."<sup>14</sup> There is a consistent understanding that historic blocs are combinations of economic, historical, and political social forces that converge to establish a dominant social order informed by ideas or ideology, institutions, and culture. However, it is important to note that the social forces unleashed by contending historical blocs could lead to anything from populism to social democracy to neo-conservatism. Whilst Gramsci was hopeful of his proletariat hegemonic project, he did acknowledge the forces of populism which did not fit neatly into the Marxist analysis of ongoing tensions between capital and labour. Gramscian concepts were largely confined to Italian Studies but Robert Cox re-conceptualised the Grams-

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*Gramsci: A diachronic Interpretation of Prison Notebooks*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 166.

12 Ibid, p.167.

13 Stephen Gill, "Epistemology, ontology, and the Italian School," Stephen Gill editor, *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 21-48.

14 Jim Igoe, Katja Neves and Dan Brockington, "A Spectacular Eco-Tour around the Historic Bloc: Theorising the Convergence of Biodiversity Conservation and Capitalist Expansion," Dan Brockington and Rosaleen Duffy editors, *Capitalism and Conservation*, (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p.20.



cian historic bloc as the interplay of ideas, institutions, and culture which not only structures social and historical processes but configures capitalist economic and political systems in creating a world order. The control of capital and exploitation of workers are articulated at multiple levels by neo-Gramscian theorists who analyse and problematise capitalist political economy, class relations, historical and social forces, and institutions.

### **The neo-Gramscians**

#### *Robert Cox and the Critical School*

By the early 1980s, Gramsci's theory on ideas, institutions, and culture was expanded to theorise political power and social forces in the making of history. In particular, the neo-Gramscians were responding to a new capitalist order that emphasised least government and crude forms of deregulation and worker exploitation and further asserting the primacy of the market as the dominant social force in western democratic societies. The neo-Gramscian School started with the seminal work of Robert Cox,<sup>15</sup> who extended Gramscian analysis to international studies and provided the framework for historical structures, where three categories of social forces- material capabilities, ideas, and institutions-interacted to form capitalist hegemony and capitalist historic blocs.<sup>16</sup> The Coxian method provided both the ontological and the epistemic relationship among material capabilities, ideas, and institutions as three pillars of capital domination and marginalisation of labour and the proletariat. For Cox, material capabilities were productive and destructive potentials, including the capability of technology to shape social and historical forces in ways not conceived feasible in the past. Whilst Cox was concerned with industries and armaments, he nevertheless appreciated the role of organisations in shaping the global political order. For example, military-industrial organisations<sup>17</sup> were clearly defining American political hegemony in the mid-

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15 Robert Cox, *Power, Production and Social Forces in the making of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

16 Ibid, p.136

17 Robert Cox, "Ideologies and the new international economic order: reflec-

1970s to early 1980s and with the onset of neo-liberalism,<sup>18</sup> there were conscious efforts by the bourgeois elite in dismantling the welfare state, and an emphasis on the centrality of international organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund<sup>19</sup> in shaping global political relations by embedding the logic of capital in all state and human activities. More important perhaps was the role of international economic entities to ensure dependency of Third World countries by implementing structural adjustments, fiscal discipline, and environmentally irresponsible infrastructure loans, locking developing and less developed nations into a cycle of debt, economic dependency, ethnocentric controls, and factionalisation. A critique of neo-liberalism was further developed by Stephen Gill who deep-dived into the Gramscian superstructure to understand and expose the contradictions of the capitalist historic bloc established by the ruling political class that promoted neoliberalism, cultural synchronisation, consumerism, inequality, and corporatism as normal mainstream engagements. Gill was a tactician who saw the inductive and deductive aspects of capital and became the most fervent critique of capitalism and the capitalist global political economy.

Ideas for Robert Cox relate to inter-subjective interpretations of the visions of the ruling class which establishes the rules for ideational discourse where confrontation, consensus, and diplomatic<sup>20</sup> agencies are applied as strategic moments to construct social and political realities of the elite. Cox noted that there were other forms of ideas including that of the ruling class where “nature and the power of the prevailing social ideology” constituted the common ground of social discourse and domination. Institutions, however, were established to inform a particular elite order,

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tions on some recent literature.” *International Organisations*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 1979, pp. 257-302.

18 Ibid, pp107-109. Also see Robert Cox and Timothy Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

19 Robert Cox with Michael Schechter, *The Political Economy of the Plural World*. (New York Routledge, 2002), p.83.

20 Robert Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 10, No.2, 1981, p.136.

and as Cox argued institutions take on their own life and they become battlegrounds for opposing tendencies between capital and labour. For Cox, institutions and hegemony are closely related<sup>21</sup> because institutions are set up by the dominant classes to establish and sustain bourgeois hegemony. Institutions eventually become important in the establishment of hegemony as elite narratives of ideas, institutions, and material capabilities are eventually challenged by counter-hegemonic historic blocs,<sup>22</sup> leading to the realignment of historical structures and modes of production. Cox established that out of ideas, institutions and material capabilities, three conceptual political and historical interrelated forms emerged including production where core-periphery relations were obfuscated by multinational and transnational activities, state institutions and systems of governance became increasingly dictated by free enterprise states and regimes, and world orders eventually demarcated by capital and planned economies.<sup>23</sup> Whilst the idea of Robert Cox was transformational in the understanding of the capitalist historical bloc, Kees van der Pijl<sup>24</sup>, and Stephen Gill, and David Law analysed two important dominant historic blocs: the Atlantic ruling class and transnational capitalist hegemony.

### **Kees van der Pijl and the Atlantic Ruling Class**

Following on from Cox, Kees van der Pijl utilised Gramscian theory to analyse the Atlantic ruling class.<sup>25</sup> For van der Pijl, the bourgeois hegemony in the North Atlantic was made up of two identical frames of reference: money-capital concept and the productive-capital concept where “the money-capital and productive-capital concepts constituted the vantage-points from which historically specific, and increasingly synthetic,

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21 Ibid, p.137.

22 Robert Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 12, No.2, 1983, pp.173-174.

23 Ibid, p.137-138.

24 Kees van der Pijl, “Ruling Classes, hegemony and the state system: theoretical and historical considerations,” *International Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 19, No.3, 1989, pp.7-35.

25 Kees van der Pijl, *The Making of the Atlantic Ruling Class*, (London: Verso, 1984).

strategies for adjusting bourgeois rule and international relations to the ongoing process of internationalisation were developed.”<sup>26</sup> Utilising Gramsci as a reference, van der Pijl constructed the foundations of the Atlantic ruling historic bloc that was based on Fordism, Taylorism, and one that subordinated labour to capital.<sup>27</sup> The Atlantic bloc evolved into an increasingly complex entity and employed scientific and instrumentalist management practices to ensure “state-monopolistic controls of the economy, postponing the restructuring of class relations by imposing a reactionary united-front configuration on the bourgeoisie, first in Italy and Germany, and subsequently in Hitler’s Europe in the early twentieth century.”<sup>28</sup> The fascists were able to attain hegemony by assembling ideas and institutions that promoted populist and nationalist discourses as “normal” mobilisation of counter-hegemonic interests. However, the fascist money-capital and worker discourses were fundamentally flawed for it rested on a misguided notion that nationalist, populist, capitalist, and class interests of the elite and the proletariat were mutually exclusive. The fascists wanted to achieve state monopoly by manipulating various factions of the civil society and they managed to achieve this with some degree of success due to the internal factionalisation of the socialist movement in the early twentieth century.

Kees van der Pijl developed his state monopoly theory by implying “that the state prominently assists in the task of imposing the discipline of capital on the vastly enlarged industrial working class, employed in new types of industry.”<sup>29</sup> Referencing Cox<sup>30</sup>, van der Pijl argued that there was the merger of nationalism and welfare by state managers to disrupt the social forces generated by urbanisation and industrialisation that caused enormous social interruptions. The ruling capitalist Atlan-

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26 Ibid, p.26

27 Ibid, p.42

28 Ibid, 156

29 Kees van der Pijl, *Transnational Classes and International Relations*, (New York Routledge, 1998), p.109.

30 Robert Cox, *Power, Production and Social Forces in the Making of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p.157.

tic historic bloc ensured that it utilised material capabilities to subvert challenges from labour and marginalised social forces and promoted a culture that shaped economic competition and elite enrichment in post-war Europe. Also important in the analysis of money capital was the transnational hegemony of the Atlantic ruling class that promoted neoliberal economics based on “the attack on the corporate ‘fortresses’ –trade unions and welfare states first, business firms next – which had formed in the three decades of hegemonic corporate liberalism and had become a fetter on the rate of exploitation of labour.”<sup>31</sup> In hindsight, the populist and nationalist discourse gave rise to a mutated form of capitalist formation that encompassed not only free-market principles but authoritarianism and deliberate lack of accountability and transparency as the ideologies of the new transitional capitalism that spread after the Second World War.

### Stephen Gill and Transnational Capitalism

Stephen Gill and David Law distinct from Kees van der Pijl looked at transnational capital and its structural manifestations and infestations in not only Europe but globally. Gill further developed his thesis on capitalism by modifying Gramsci’s theory of hegemony where political hegemony of the bourgeois elite would be fully achieved when major institutions and forms of organisation- economic, social, and political- as well as cultures of the dominant state become models for emulation in other subordinate or peripheral states. In this view of hegemony and historic blocs, the patterns of emulation are most likely in the core or most developed states, rather than in the less developed periphery.<sup>32</sup> In essence what the neo-Gramscian scholars like Gill were doing was using Gramscian theory-in particular his most important theoretical formula-

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31 Kees van der Pijl, “What happened to European Option for Eastern Europe” in Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton editors, *Social Forces in the Making of the New Europe* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p.188.

32 Stephen Gill, *American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commission*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 47.

tions hegemony, historic blocs, ideas, culture, and institution- to analyse the fault lines of global capitalism and elite domination and focus on the structural power of capital which had material capabilities to integrate large parts of the globe into a single capitalist bloc and marginalise labour and wages.

It was the transnational capitalist historic-bloc that defined international institutional structures such as the Trilateral Commission, which was created initially as a response to a pervasive sense that the international system and the global distribution of power were in a state of flux.<sup>33</sup> According to Stephen Gill, the Trilateral Commission, in the post-war era, became the “network” from which the ideological basis for a capitalist world economy emanated. This supra-state institution, however, also assisted in shaping state policies, especially of countries that were members of the liberal and neo-liberal capitalist bloc. Capital had significantly increased its structural capabilities thus directly challenging and occasionally undermining the relative power of the state which became subordinated to transnational interests. Historic structures are shaped by this structural power of capital within the transnational mode of production, and according to Gill, “the staggering flow of transnational finance have a much more murky ‘nationality’, with the result that they fit less well into the nation-centred analytical categories still quite common in theories of capital-state relations.”<sup>34</sup> The increase in the structural power of capital and the decline in the relative power of the state-assisted the growing structural power of business.<sup>35</sup>

According to Stephen Gill,<sup>36</sup> the capitalist market economy of the United

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33 Stephen Gill, “The Emerging Hegemony of Transnational Capital: Trilateralism and Global Order,” David Rapkin editor, *World Leadership and Hegemony*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990), p.123.

34 Jeffery A. Winters, “Power and the Control of Capital,” *World Politics*, Vol 46, No.3, 1994, p. 421.

35 John Stopford and Susan Strange, *Rival States, Rival Firms: Competition for World Market Shares*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

36 Stephen Gill, *Restructuring Global Politics: Trilateral Relations and World Order “After” the Cold War*, York University Centre for International and Strategic Studies Working Paper No. 11, 1992, p. 10.

States is now ever more central in the world economy, although its centrality contains substantial contradictions for the rest of the world because of economic interdependence. The changes in the United States reflect a global trend that we can call the internationalisation of the state, a development that calls into question the Westphalian model of state sovereignty. Thus, globalisation is linked to, and partly engenders a process of mutation in previous forms of state and political identity and retards the development of satellite states. According to Gill, the neo-Gramscian framework provides theoreticians with a set of meta-principles to help explain and interpret the ontology and the constitution of historically specific hegemonic configurations: "social ontology rests upon the inter-subjective ('historical-subjective') frameworks that help to objectify and constitute social life, such as patterns of social reproduction, the political economy of production and destruction, of culture and civilisation."<sup>37</sup> Far-reaching academic developments in international relations theory, in particular with the seminal work of Robert Cox in 1981, 1983, and 1987 opened up new areas of research and critical analysis. Developing Cox's Gramscian historical materialism, Stephen Gill analysed the structural power of capital and the associated transnational mode of production, including cultural imperialism and social forces unleashed by neoliberalism in the 1980s. In addition, for Gill, it became imperative to understand the transnational power of capital which provided the ideological and legal legitimacy to the capitalist global political economy. The neo-Gramscian approaches have, therefore, reinvigorated Gramscian studies by providing a new analytical paradigm based on the interpretation of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.

Stephen Gill identifies "cultural imperialism" as one of the drivers of the global political economy and argues that there exists a global constitution on capital that operates in ways that seek to subordinate the universal to the particular interests of large capital, that is its discipline operates hierarchically (in terms of social classes, gender, race and in terms of national power) within and across different nations, regions and in

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37 Stephen Gill, *Power and Resistance in the new World Order*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) p. 44.

the global political economy. According to Gill, “part of what is at issue is how world society has been progressively configured by possessive individualism, that is by individual, particular, or private appropriation, while production has become progressively universal and socialised. According to Gill, new constitutionalism prescribes a series of measures to restructure states and civil societies based on the primacy of free enterprise, and the discipline of capital operating broadly within the constraints of classical liberal notions of the rule of law.”<sup>38</sup> Gill, van der Pijl, and Cox appreciate the role played by culture in hegemonic formations but these are not central to their analysis of the international economic system. Gill adopts a Gramscian framework to analyse transnational capital which allows hegemonic powers like the US to dominate the global political economy. Kees van der Pijl is concerned with the relative power of the Atlantic ruling class and Cox utilised the Gramscian framework to look at social forces in the making of international historic blocs.

All three neo-Gramscian scholars construct an interlocking model that analyses ideas, institutions, and culture in the making of the capitalist world order as well as sustaining the global political economy as a capitalist historic bloc. The model also is customised by Kees van der Pijl to analyse regional social forces, including the creation of the Atlantic ruling class.

### **The Neo-Gramscian Model**

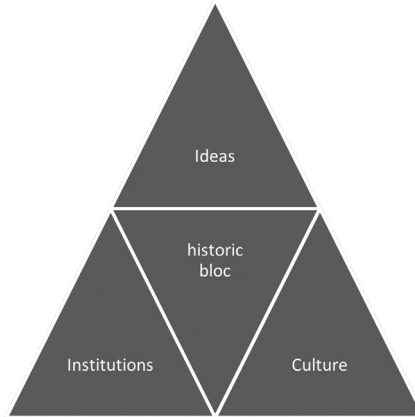
The neo-Gramscian model imposes that ideas, institutions, and culture form the foundation of capitalist hegemonic social forces that operate within the logic of capital. Elite domination is established by engineering political institutions, economic systems, and governance frameworks that work hand in glove to sustain a regime of commodification, capital accumulation, and labour exploitation.<sup>39</sup> Capitalist ideas emerge from

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38 Stephen Gill, “Constitution of Global Capitalism,” Paper presented to a Panel: The Capitalist World, Past and Present at the International Studies, Association Annual Convention, Los Angeles, 2000, Accessed 6 June 2007.

39 Kees van der Pijl, *Transnational Classes and International Relations*, (New York





experiences where ethnicity, class, capital, labour, technology, and policies intersect to form the political apparatus on control and consensus. According to Henk Overbeek, the consensus is “constantly re-worked through, the agency of social forces, both those forces (fractions of the bourgeoisie, privileged layers of the working class, etc.) which are (being) incorporated into the historic bloc as well as those oppositional and counter-hegemonic forces that attempt to block or deflect this emerging new historic bloc.”<sup>40</sup> Whilst capitalist control and class continue to play an underlying theme in elite political and economic discourses, the dominant social forces assume hegemony whereas marginalised and exploited groups contemplate counter-hegemony with aims to assemble deliberative and alternative ideas, institutions, and culture of the subaltern.<sup>41</sup> However, marginalised voices often struggle to establish counter-hegemony because they do not have structural, relational, or constitutive power to counter capital exploitation. Stephen Gill and Claire Cutler

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Routledge, 1998), p.31.

40 Henk Overbeek, “Transnational class formation and concepts of control: towards a genealogy of the Amsterdam Project in international political economy,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* Vol. 7, No. 2, 2004, p.131.

41 Robert Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method” in Stephen Gill editor, *Historical Materialism and International Relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.53.

summarised the neo-Gramscian model as one characterised by bourgeois control: “bourgeois hegemony implies the rule and forward-looking leadership of a bloc of social forces drawn from political and civil society, which sustains the existing order by incorporating and gaining the consent of subordinate social classes, presenting its leadership as legitimate and operating as if it is in a general or universal interest.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the elite bourgeoisie system is highly complex and entails an elaborate system of coercion and consent, token welfare, and exploitative reign of free-market mechanisms.

Robert Cox heard the voices of neo-liberalism and re-analysed the purpose of historical forces and argued that “historical structure is a picture of a particular configuration of forces.”<sup>43</sup> Cox re-casted Gramscian ideas and developed a conceptual model for analysing hegemony, historic blocs, and material capabilities by extending the state-centric applications of Gramscian historic on to the international arena and argued that capitalist power, production, and social forces operated in both the core and the periphery by marginalising workers. Cox’s Gramscian international historic bloc influenced the works of Kees Van der Pijl in their analysis of the Atlantic hegemonic historic bloc<sup>44</sup> and Stephen Gill and David Law’s global political economy and transnational hegemony.

However, since the 1980s, there have been several academics who questioned the silence of ethnicity and culture in the neo-Gramscian approach. Randolph Persaud analysed the significance of race and ethnicity in informing global colour lines. Hannes Lacher argued that the Coxian method was a response to the rise of neoliberalism in the late

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42 Stephen Gill and A. Claire Cutler, “New constitutionalism and world order: general introduction.” Stephen Gill and A. Claire Cutler editors, *New Constitutionalism and World Order*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.14-15

43 Robert Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 10, No.2, 1981, p. 135.

44 Henk Overbeek and Kees Van der Pijl, “Restructuring Hegemony in the Global Political Economy” in Hank Overbeek editor, *Restructuring Hegemony in the Global Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 1993).

1970s and early 1980s and was too focused on the North American experience whereas Owen Worth observed that the neo-Gramscians have not considered the works of Gramscian and Marxist theorists such as Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and Ernesto Laclau.

### Critics of the neo-Gramscians

What Cox, van der Pijl, and Gill were missing was the significant role played by race and ethnicity in shaping the world order and transnational capitalist historic bloc. The challenge of the ongoing absence of ethnic politics and inter-group conflict was highlighted by Randolph Persaud and Rob Walker who argued that race and ethnicity have been given the epistemological status of silence in international relations and provided alternatives on how questions of race might be taken up in the contemporary analysis of international relations.<sup>45</sup> Quoting Haitian historian Michel-Ralph Trouillot<sup>46</sup>, Persaud and Walker describe this status of silence as the moment of fact creation, the moment of fact assembly, the moment of retrieval, and the moment of retrospective significance. Fact creation was a discourse on white historical narratives where those of black or brown skins were identified as ahistorical anomalies in the overall colonial imaginary. Fact retrieval was an act of white conceptualisation where selective memory of white historians was utilised to re-write race and ethnic history of mostly exploited peoples, and the moment of retrieval was the point when black and coloured historians challenged, documented, and published alternative social and political discourses.

However, Coxian methods have been criticised by other Marxist and Gramscian scholars as focused too much on North American and European experiences. Hannes Lacher argued that "historical materialism of

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45 Randolph Persaud and Rob Walker, "Apertura: race in international relations," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 26, No.4, 2001, pp. 373-377.

46 Michel-Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995). Trouillot provided a powerful narrative on the general silence of Western historiography on non-Western events and in particular those historical narratives that made sense to only Western observers and readers (see pages 96 and 97).

Cox cannot be considered a successful reconstruction of historical materialism” because of self-limiting quality of the categories and concepts he deploys.”<sup>47</sup> Lacher continues that successful reconstruction of his analytical framework was based on “escape movement of the 1980s,”<sup>48</sup> and has an inherent bias in elite centric, top-down, instrumentalism.<sup>49</sup> However, Lacher’s analysis fails to appreciate that the neo-Gramscian project of Cox was aimed at identifying the contradictions of neo-liberal political, economic and social hegemony and the historic bloc, and Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* provided the conceptual tools for identifying and analysing ideas, institutions, and culture that informed resistance, control and counter-elite narratives in a growing unequal North American society. It may seem as if Cox was attempting to unconsciously delineate many historical structures<sup>50</sup> but he was paying attention to the “visions of what the discipline is/ought to be concerned with at the time.”<sup>51</sup>

Cox was highlighting not only the failures of capitalism but was theorising and highlighting the pervasive aspects of capital that created core and periphery relations within western democracies and developing nations by embedding exploitation, inequality, dependency, violence, and class wars. It was the power, production, and social forces of the bourgeois elite that restructured international and domestic politics and enabled material capabilities of capital to establish hegemony.

Owen Worth hopes to some extent to embed the neo-Gramscian approaches in the realms of Marxist orthodoxy.<sup>52</sup> For Owen, Robert Cox

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47 Hannes Lacher, “History, Structures and World Orders: On the (Cross-) Purposes of Neo-Gramscian Theory” in Alison Ayers editor, *Gramsci, Political Economy, and International Relations Theory*, (New York: Palgrave, 2008), p. 77.

48 Ibid, p.78

49 Ibid, p.79

50 Hannes Lacher, *Beyond Globalisation*, (New York Routledge, 2006)

51 Chris White, “ The Case of IPS Plurality” in Jason Abbott and Owen Worth editors, *Critical Perspectives on International Political Economy* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 34-57.

52 Owen Worth, “Recasting Gramsci in International Politics,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2011, p. 379. Also see: “The Poverty and Potential of Gramscian Thought,” *International Relations*,” International Politics,

inspired analysis has not taken into account the works of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and Ernesto Laclau. The most significant theoretical advancement in the neo-Gramscian scholarship on culture and ethnicity before Persaud and Walker was heralded by Stuart Hall who was influenced by Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony and used Gramscian theory to analyse culture and ethnicity in Great Britain. Hall sketched some of how Gramscian perspective could be used to "transform and rework some of the existing theories and paradigms in the analysis of racism and related social phenomenon."<sup>53</sup> This was a quantum leap in the reinterpretation of Gramscian theory because it successfully moved Gramscian thought from Italian studies to the study of ethnicity and culture in one of the hegemonic European states.

Hall developed an analytical framework around seven key social concepts: the centrality of history in cultural formations, the dialectical aspects of cultural discourses, the non-reductive approaches to the questions of culture, the non-homogenous nature of the class, the lack of linkages among Gramsci's key concepts (ideas, institutions, and culture), the role of the state in ethnic and class struggles, the role of culture in social formations, and the role of ideology in ethnicity and culture.<sup>54</sup> Hall embedded Gramsci in history and in particular in historical processes and historical interpretation and argued that history played a role in cultural hegemony and influenced ethnic relations within nation-states. Hall also analysed that ethnic relations were more fluid than class and that ethnic hegemony was sustained by hegemonic ideas, institutions, and culture. In essence, Hall stated that class was not the only factor that contributed to ethnic hegemony but there were systemic and structural layers that permeated the social terrains of political hegemony.

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Vol, 45, No.6, 2008, pp.633-649; "Where did the critical go?" *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 14, No.3, 2011, pp.358-365.

53 Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the study of Culture and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, Vol. 10, No.2, 1986, p.23.

54 *Ibid*, p.23-27.

Whilst Hall focused on culture and ethnicity as factors influencing the dominant historical bloc, Ernesto Laclau saw the Gramscian historic bloc from the perspective of the “logic of the contingent” where fracture and withdrawal became the explanatory horizon of social forces.”<sup>55</sup> Laclau dismisses the cognitive approach to social forces by defining political hegemony as an articulatory practice that “links together contingent elements– linguistic and non-linguistic, natural and social– into relational systems in which the identity of the elements is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. A key condition of this approach is that all such elements are contingent and unfixed so that their meaning and identity is only partially fixed by articulatory practices.”<sup>56</sup>

Laclau approaches hegemony as the configuration of the contingent that cannot be explained by the structure itself but by social forces “which has to be partial to the structure”<sup>57</sup> There is a consensus character of hegemony where there “would be an imposition of pre-given organisation principle and not something emerging from political interactions between groups.”<sup>58</sup> Mark Devenney et al acknowledged Laclau’s conceptualisation of hegemony – particularly their work in the 1980s around hegemony – clearly included not only the extra-institutional, but also the institutional terrain, this possibility now seems to be closed off, and a significant terrain of struggle is left aside through its characterisation as “pure administration.”<sup>59</sup> Whilst the tensions between the institution and extra-institutional

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55 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, (London: Verso, 2011), p.7.

56 David Howarth, “Discourse, hegemony and populism: Ernesto Laclau’s political theory Ernesto Laclau,” David Howarth editor, *Post-Marxism, populism and critique*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), p.5. *On Populist Reason*, (London: Verso, 2005); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, (London: Verso, 1985); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, “Post-Marxism without Apologies,” *New Left Review*, Vol. 166, pp.79-106.

57 David Howarth editor, *Ernesto Laclau: Post Marxism, Populism & Critique*, (Oxon: Routledge 2015), p. 28.

58 Ibid, p.72.

59 Mark Devenney et al, *Critical Exchange: Ernesto Laclau, Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2015, p. 309.

remain unresolved, Devenney argues for “sharp separation between the extra-institutional and the institutional, and the characterisation of only the former as amenable to politics, as well as the strictly descriptive and analytical character of his theoretical enterprise.”<sup>60</sup>

Despite important contributions from Hall and Laclau, the discovery of Gramsci and in particular the roles of ideas, institutions, and culture have provisioned rich analytical discourses on understanding hegemony and contending social forces on domination and resistance. As discussed, ideas are the ideology of the ruling class but this dominant ideology is subject to challenge during counter-elite activities. Ideology is also closely linked to culture and as Stephen Gill highlighted, the ruling class engage in cultural synchronisation through cultural imperialism and constitutional, legal, legislative, and political controls, aimed at subordinating the masses. Dominant cultures operate both horizontally and vertically and have the structural capability and power to dominate and subjugate weaker ones. Institutions in the Gramscian sense are engineered entities of the capitalist system where electoral systems, government, constitutions, and economic ideologies are utilised to embed neoliberal hegemony. International organisations such as the Trilateral Commission, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund ensure neo-liberal and elite hegemony operate internationally and ensure safeguards are in place to enable the expansion of capital.

Writing in support of neo-Gramscians, William Robinson reflects that “the neo-Gramscians acknowledge profound changes to world order but many, although not all, retain the framework of the nation-state and the inter-state system in their concrete analyses of hegemony, despite the concomitant focus on transnational processes and forces.”<sup>61</sup> Richard Falk<sup>62</sup>

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60 Ibid, 310.

61 William Robinson, “Gramsci and Globalisation: From Nation-State to Transnational Hegemony,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol. 8, 2005, p. 561.

62 Richard Falk, ‘The Critical Realist Tradition and the Demystification of Interstate Power: E. H. Carr, Hedley Bull, and Robert W. Cox, in Stephen Gill and James H. Mittelman (eds.), *Innovation and Transformation in International*

argues that the emergence of neo-Gramscians was a result of a lack of appreciation of historical forces in shaping world order. Joining Robinson and Falk are Craig Murphy<sup>63</sup>, Mark Rupert<sup>64</sup>, Adam David Morton<sup>65</sup>, and Timothy Sinclair<sup>66</sup> who acknowledge the contribution of the neo-Gramscians in expanding critical thinking on historical structures, ruling classes, and transnational capitalism.

Despite support from various quarters of academia for the neo-Gramscian scholarship, the fundamental question remains whether the ideas of the 1980s are still relevant in the twenty-first century. The answer is provided to some extent by Jonathan Pass<sup>67</sup> who identified the direct benefits of the neo-Gramscians. According to Pass, “we are indebted to the neo-Gramscians for enriching our understanding of the complexities of the transnationalisation process, specifically transnational class formation and the dynamics of regional integration, as well as supplying us with a useful set of concepts and analytical tools for theory construction.”<sup>68</sup>

Mustapha Kamal Pasha argued that “the neo- Gramscian project in International Relations (IR) has offered refined, theoretically- informed analyses of the production, deployment, and effects of power on a world scale, avoiding the narrowmethodological and epistemological constrict-

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*Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), p. 45.

63 Craig Murphy, “Understanding IR: understanding Gramsci,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 24, No.2, 1998, p.419.

64 Mark Rupert, “Reading Gramsci in the Era of Globalising Capitalism,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, Vol. 8, 2005, pp. 483-497.

65 Adam David Morton, “Historicising Gramsci: situating ideas in and beyond their context,” *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol 10, No.1, 2003, pp.118-146.

66 Robert Cox and Timothy Sinclair, *Approaches to world order*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1996.

67 Jonathan Pass, “Gramsci meets emergentist materialism: Towards a neo-Gramscian perspective on World Order,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 11, No.4, 2018, pp. 595-616,

68 *Ibid*, p.614.



tions of problem-solving, whether rational choice, neorealism, or constructivism.”<sup>69</sup> However, Pasha noticed that there were shortcomings in the neo-Gramscian approach because it proposed a reductionist conception of culture.<sup>70</sup> This misreading of cultural forms “leads neo-Gramscians to discount the scope of the role of intellectuals and the broader social and institutional conditions for the reproduction of the public spirit and hegemony, which leads them unintentionally to reproduce an elitist, top-down notion of hegemony.”<sup>71</sup> Randolph Persaud and Alina Sajed recently highlighted the usefulness of Stephen Gill’s concept of consensus. According to the authors, the “idea behind consensus argument is that elites have managed to get the working classes and the poor to ‘buy into the key assumptions and practices and promises of capitalism as a social system.”<sup>72</sup> However, Persaud argues for broadening the neo-Gramscian analysis to incorporate race and racism “conquest, empire, cultural hegemony, and to the reproduction of both capitalist economies and societies, not to mention the rather central role of race in the configuration of forms of state and world orders.”<sup>73</sup> Cox, van der Pijl, and Gill also emphasise that the neoliberal transnational economic and political hegemony operates both vertically and horizontally within the international historic bloc with the significant structural capability to influence global order. Whilst the modus operandi of the neoliberal system may differ among regions, ideas, institutions, and culture of capital are aimed at creating a singular political, economic and social discourse based on the logic of capital.

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69 Mustapha Kamal Pasha, “Return to the Source: Gramsci, Future, and International Relations” in Alison J. Ayers editor, *Gramsci, Political Economy and International Relations Theory: Modern Prince and Naked Emperors*, (New York: Palgrave, 2008), p. 199.

70 Ibid, p.202.

71 Ibid, p.202

72 Randolph Persaud & Alina Sajed, “Race, Gender and Culture in International Relations: an Introduction” in Randolph Persaud & Alina Sajed editors, *Race, Gender and Culture in International Relations: Post-colonial Perspectives*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1-18.

73 Randolph Persaud, “Neo-Gramscian Theory and Third World Violence: A Time for Broadening,” *Globalization*, Vol. 13, No.5, p.550.

### The ongoing relevance of neo-Gramscians

The ongoing relevance of neo-Gramscians, in particular of Robert Cox, is that they enable a theoretical framework to analyse hegemonic historical social forces as well as counter-hegemonic interpretations of history. The neo-Gramscian approach can be used to analyse any historical social forces including the rise and fall of neoliberal capitalism which is a central argument of many neo-Gramscian scholars, including the works of those that are not from the neo-Gramscian school. David Kotz<sup>74</sup> has reinterpreted the history of neoliberal capitalism and his book *The Rise of Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism* the themes of his political-economic history can be divided into three parts using the Coxian epistemology. The first part deals with the ideology of neoliberalism capitalism and its practice,<sup>75</sup> the second part references neo-liberal institutions like IMF, World Bank, and WTO<sup>76</sup> and the third part is the analysis of the culture of easy credit and less regulation of financial institutions, governments, and international trade regimes that led to transnational fraud, corruption, and global economic crisis.<sup>77</sup> A similar analytical framework can be applied to the counter-hegemonic historical narrative on the environment and those who acknowledge and frame a counter-history on environmental degradation and ecocide.<sup>78</sup>

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74 David Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

75 Ibid, pp.8-84

76 Ibid, pp. 85-126

77 Ibid, 127-180; Also see: Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Never Ending Nightmare: How Neoliberalism Dismantles Democracy*, (London: Verso, 2019). John Comaroff, "The end of neoliberalism? What is left of the left," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 637, No.1, 2011, pp. 141-147; David Harvey, *Seventeen contradictions and the end of capitalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Sadik Ünay, "Hegemony, aid and power: A neo-Gramscian analysis of the World Bank," *European Journal of Economic and Political Studies*, Vol.3, No.2, 2010, pp. 39-52.

78 Rob White, "Transnational Environmental Crime" in Mangai Natarajan ed-itor, *International and Transnational Crime and Justice 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, (Cambridge:

The neoliberal global political economy was established in the late 1970s by dismantling embedded liberalism of the welfare state of the 1940s and its principal motive was to abolish state intervention in the national political economy, which evolved from the ashes of the Second World War and was influenced by the social liberal economics of John Maynard Keynes,<sup>79</sup> who analysed imperfections of the free market and proposed an alternative where state intervened to correct market failures of bourgeoisie capitalism. For Keynes, the political economy of free-market by its very logic created huge inequalities and these problems could only be addressed by state intervention or economic policies that incorporated the unequal classes within the national and global political economy. It was the imperfection of the market and most importantly its inability for self-correction that led Keynes to argue for the welfare state and full employment.

The welfare state that Keynes advocated came under increasing pressure from the free market and least government theorists like Frederick Hayek<sup>80</sup> and Milton Friedman,<sup>81</sup> who argued against any form of state intervention in the free market capitalist economy because they conceptualised the market as a self-correcting system where market contradictions and free-market failures are managed and imperfections rectified through the trickle-down effect, characterised by fair distribution of wealth across various classes over time. But this was hardly the case. Inequality continued to fester behind the rhetoric of affluence and wealth concentration and social fragmentation intensified at an alarming and uncontrollable rate in many industrialised and developing countries.

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Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 103-108.

79 John Maynard Keynes, *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, (New York: Harcourt, 1936); Also see: Joseph Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934)

80 Friedrich A. von Hayek, *The road to serfdom*, (New York: Routledge, 1980). Originally published in 1944 and re-published following the onset of neoliberal capitalism to argue in favour of free market economic forces.

81 Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982)

In the Hayek formula, the individual pursuit of freedom (anchored in the system of private property) is the main plank of the Hayek program: everybody must be free to enter/exit the field of operations that is the market economy. Although it is called 'market economy', the market is only the entry/exit point into an otherwise intractable process.

Friedman's positive framework is shaped by Smith's wealth-maximising *laissez-faire*, invisible hand augmented by neoclassical analysis that perceives the optimal allocation of resources via the voluntary exchange as the primary mechanism for economic growth. The foundation of Friedman's wealth/freedom maximizing approach is the freedom of private individuals to employ and exchange their labour and resources voluntarily in free markets according to the "capitalist ethic": "to each according to what he and the instruments he owns produces."<sup>82</sup>

The neoliberal economic discourses which emerged in the late 1970s and the early 1980s were based on three pillars of positivistic, epistemological, and free-market principles: deregulation, instrumentalism, and free-market discourses based on empirical considerations of rational choice and market forces, where individual and elite pursuits for self-enrichment and freedom reigned instead of collective welfare of citizens and civil societies. A small group of powerful and the rich defined the global political-economic discourses and utilised institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization to craft elite capitalist political hegemony and free trade and globalisation regimes that promoted unfair trade and transnational exploitation of workers. Here the neo-Gramscians, Robert Cox, Stephen Gill, and Kees van der Pijl, provided the analytical framework that enabled deep analysis of neoliberalism and the structures of capitalism that were operating globally.

States of the third world under a neo-liberal global regime are forced to operate within the unequal terms imposed by hegemonic entities and the elite who articulate core social, economic, and political discourses within the terms of structures of control, subordination, and marginalisation. Moreover, the mainstream discourses established by the hegemonic

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82 Ibid, p.161.

powers ensured economic dependency, neo-colonialism, social isolation, racism, and the political hegemony of ethnocratic regimes. Neo-Gramscians like Randolph Persaud have been instrumental in identifying the challenges faced by the global south and in particular how ethnicity and culture in developing countries are subordinated to hegemonic histories and culture that defines what Persaud calls “global colour lines.”<sup>83</sup>

Not only developing countries but historical narratives on fossil fuel, climate change, and food security have been re-packaged by neoliberal approaches as necessities of neoliberal capitalism. David Levy and Peter Newell noted that the “neo-Gramscian concept of hegemony can be usefully applied to understand the nature of governance system at the industry level.”<sup>84</sup> The prevailing form of neoliberal governance is increasingly focused on ensuring that multinationals and hegemonic states can easily influence investment and trade policies transnationally including in the regions. For example, in Latin America, “market openness made countries in the region more vulnerable to the external environments”<sup>85</sup> However in Asia, there was “state capture by powerful domestic business groups” in support of realigning neoliberal capitalism by focusing on the growing technology markets for multinational US corporations.

Neoliberal capitalism has now expanded to include the growing technology markets that are based on mostly US companies developing and delivering digital devices, digital social media platforms, and digital services. Digital devices include smartphones, the internet of things, smartwatches, body cameras, smart eyeglasses, and surveillance and biometric cameras. Digital social media platform includes Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, snap chat, WhatsApp, Viber, and digital services include Am-

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83 Randolph B. Persaud & Narendran Kumarakulasingam, “Violence and ordering of the Third World: an introduction,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.40, No.2, 2019, pp. 199-206.

84 David Levy & Peter Newell, *Multinationals in global governance*, Cheltenham: Edward Edgar, 2006, p.156.

85 Jean Grugel, Pia Riggirozzi, and Ben Thirkell-White, Beyond the Washington Consensus? Asia and Latin America in search for more autonomous development,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No.3, 2008, p.507.

azon web services, Google, Microsoft, Cisco, Netflix and host of other service delivery channels through resellers and business partners.<sup>86</sup> The emergence of US digital hegemony is an extension of transnational capital that devises new ways of sustaining highly unequal neoliberal order by creating digital wants through technological disruptions with new levels of thought control in societies.<sup>87</sup>

### **Towards US Technological Hegemony and Chinese Counter-Hegemony**

The neo-Gramscian theoretical framework allows analysts to critically analyse the terrains of political forces that shape global, regional, and local social and economic discourses. Of importance are historical discourses that challenge and re-assess embedded neoliberal capitalism which is transforming at a rapid pace to incorporate new technological capabilities including technological products, cyber espionage,<sup>88</sup> data profiling,<sup>89</sup> online hacking, digital surveillance, sentiment analytics, and deep data mining.

Cox's theory on ideas, institution, and material capabilities can be applied to the hegemony of technology companies, in particular, those US technology companies that continuously produce and updates technological products, platforms, and services that have a global reach. According to *CNBC*, the largest technology firms by 2018 sales estimates are: "Apple, \$273.3 billion (FY ends in Sept.), Amazon, \$228.7 billion, Alphabet, \$131.3 billion, Microsoft, \$106.4 billion (FY ends in June), IBM, \$78.8 billion, Intel, \$63.8 billion, Hewlett-Packard, \$54 billion (FY ends in

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86 Xiaoming Zhu, *Emerging Champions in the Digital Economy New Theories and Cases on Evolving Technologies and Business Models*, (Singapore: Springer, 2019)

87 Truby, Jon, and Rafael Brown. "Human digital thought clones: the Holy Grail of artificial intelligence for big data." *Information & Communications Technology Law* Vol. 30, No. 2, 2021, pp.140-168.

88 Gary McGraw, "Cyber war is inevitable (unless we build security in)," *Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 36, No. 1, 2013, pp. 109-119.

89 Sarah Myers West, "Data capitalism: Redefining the logics of surveillance and privacy," *Business & Society*, Vol. 58, No. 1, 2019, pp. 20-41.

October), Facebook, \$53.8 billion, Cisco, \$48.5 billion (FY ends in July), and Oracle, \$39.8 billion (FY ends in May).<sup>90</sup>

Ideas on technological innovation are generated by a group of researchers in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and these group of researchers carry out their tasks at various research institutions and knowledge hubs funded by US technological companies. The objectives of these research institutions and technological hubs are to develop, test, and deploy digital artifacts ready for commercialisation. According to Federich Wu, “in terms of research and development brainpower, the U.S. National Science Board’s latest data reported that universities in America produced 39,834 STEM doctorates.”<sup>91</sup> However, China is a distant second with 34,103 STEM graduates and increasing catching up with the US transnational technology companies by implementing counter-hegemonic strategies such as the “Made in China 2025 Plan” that targets “the following 10 priority sectors: (i) next-generation information technology; (ii) advanced digitally controlled machine tools and robots; (iii) aviation and aerospace equipment; (iv) marine engineering equipment and high-tech vessels; (v) advanced rail transit equipment; (vi) low and new energy vehicles; (vii) power equipment; (viii) agricultural machinery; (ix) new materials; and (x) biopharmaceuticals and high-end medical equipment.”<sup>92</sup>

US technology hegemony in the last 10 years has led to Chinese counter-hegemony in the field.<sup>93</sup> The most fierce competition between the two

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90 “The ten biggest US tech companies will top \$1 trillion in sales this year,” *CNBC*, 21 January 2018 <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/01/21/ten-largest-us-tech-firms-2018-revenue-seen-topping-1-trillion.html>- Accessed 27 October 2019.

91 Federich Wu, “Introducing the Worlds Technology Leader,” *International Economy*, Winter 2019, p.66.

92 Chi Hung Kwan, “The China-US Trade War: Deep-Rooted Causes, Shifting Focus and Uncertain Prospects,” *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 2019, p3.<https://doi.org/10.1111/aep.12284>

93 Kang, JungIl, and Yooshin Im. “Competition for Technology Hegemony between the US and China from a Geopolitical Point of View,” *International Journal of Military Affairs*, Vol. 6, 2021, pp. 20-26.

rivals was in the area of cyber espionage, data mining, and individual profiling. Hacking into trusted IT systems of the US and their allies enabled Chinese intelligence to gain invaluable insights into US intellectual property, information, and intelligence assets<sup>94</sup>. Chinese government front companies<sup>95</sup> utilised digital technologies to track dissidents on domestic and on foreign shores and the Chinese government through various universities established collaboration hubs<sup>96</sup> with top-tier universities in western democracies to influence research and development in core digital technologies.

The material capabilities of digital devices, platforms, and services are far-reaching because the digital infrastructure has pre-built capabilities to send real-time customer usage information to the parent companies holding intellectual property.<sup>97</sup> In addition, new technology has capabilities to create biometric profiling and tracking of technology users, including the ability to undertake invasive surveillance and geo-locate particular persons and groups, and use deep data mining services to predict behaviour and uncover political, economic, and social patterns. The most rudimentary form of computer attack was the denial of service in the late twentieth century, but technology has become extremely sophisticated with the development and syndication of machine learning, artificial intelligence, and robotics, including drone and digital satellite capabilities that can be programmed and weaponised with information relay hubs using telecommunications infrastructures.<sup>98</sup> In the last ten

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94 Inkster, Nigel. "Chinese intelligence in the cyber age," *Survival*, Vol 55, No.1, 2015, pp. 45-66.

95 Dotson, John D. "On the" Front:Line of Chinese Espionage: A New Lexicon for Understanding Chinese Front Companies?," *American Intelligence Journal*, Vol. 29, No.2, 2011, pp. 55-69.

96 Chi-Cheung, Leung, and Hilary Du Cros, "Confucius institutes: multiple reactions and interactions," *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 12, No.2, 2014, pp. 66-86.

97 Herman Mark Schwartz, "American hegemony: intellectual property rights, dollar centrality, and infrastructural power," *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2019, pp. 490-519, DOI: 10.1080/09692290.2019.1597754

98 Chacon, Maria Del Mar, and Abhishek Rajawat, "A case study on Huawei



years, the structural power of technology has increased significantly, including the geopolitical reach of the transnational US and Chinese-based technological companies.<sup>99</sup> There are three parts to this technological hegemonic structure: owners of technology, researchers and developers of technology, and technology consumers.

Big technology corporations control computer-mediated experiences, giving them direct power over political, economic, social, and cultural domains of life – imperial control.<sup>100</sup> According to Michael Kwet, “Global North intelligence agencies partner with their corporations to conduct mass and targeted surveillance in the Global South – which intensifies imperial state surveillance. US elites have persuaded people that society must proceed according to its ruling class conceptions of the digital world, setting the foundation for tech hegemony.”<sup>101</sup>

The US technology hegemony also displays a pervasive form of technological structural power aimed at creating dependency for less technologically developed countries as identified by Michael Kwet. Stephen Gill identified this form of structural power with capabilities to incorporate large parts of the globe into the global capitalist political economy. However, this argument can be extended to include the digital economy that is changing rapidly with technological advancement, colonising vast regions into an integrated digital space that defines and distribute terms of use regimes, forcing consumers to surrender their privacy.

Similar to the Atlantic ruling class of Kees Van der Pijl, there is a new elite techno-class that has emerged as a result of the US technological hegemony and Chinese counter-hegemony. This techno-class wields considerable power and is instrumental in setting up technological research and development hubs in collaboration with government and private sector business partners

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technologies,” *Journal of the Community Development in Asia*, Vol 2, No. 3, 2019, pp.29-36.

99 Dwayne Winseck, “The Geopolitical Economy of the Global Internet Infrastructure,” *Journal of Information Policy*, Vol. 7, pp. 228–267

100 Michael Kwet, “Digital colonialism: US empire and the new imperialism in the Global South,” *Race & Class* Vol. 60, No. 4, 2019, pp: 3-26.

101 Ibid.

across multiple nations. Stephen Gill<sup>102</sup> analysed that capitalism to operate at its optimum state, requires a set of rules, procedures, and regulations that operate transnationally and this is achieved by the constitution of global capitalism. Similarly, the political economy of technology has established a similar constitution where the design, deployment, and use of digital artifacts are regulated across states through a set of common rules and procedures.<sup>103</sup>

These rules and procedures are now part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and World Trade Organisation agreements. According to Gaël Le Reux, the United States proposed its gold standard for digital trade and it “reflected the appropriately strong copyright protection and enforcement that (exist) in U.S. law and at the same time guaranteed that the TPP didn’t go beyond US law. In other words, it was a fairly straightforward projection of the United States’ Digital Millennium Copyright Act with unprecedented geographical coverage.”<sup>104</sup> The TPP provision was aimed at ensuring that rules and procedures were firmly in place to support US technological hegemony. However, following the US pull-out from TPP, the new US government under the leadership of Donald Trump sought strong intellectual protections from the World Trade Organisations for its digital infrastructure.<sup>105</sup>

Whilst not succumbing to retroactive analytics, the material capabilities of hegemonic and non-hegemonic actors, as described by Robert Cox, Stephen Gill, and Kees Van der Pijl, continue to play decisive roles in shaping the international order and the global digital political economy. The international discourse has shifted from the traditional social forces and power relations of neoliberal economics to the one where

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102 Stephen Gill, “Globalisation, market civilisation, and disciplinary neoliberalism,” *Millennium*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 1995, pp. 399-423.

103 Xiudian Dai, *The digital revolution and governance*, (New York: Routledge, 2018)

104 Gaël Le Roux, “TTIP negotiations, policy convergence, and the transatlantic digital economy,” *Business and Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2017, p. 727

105 Susan Ariel Aaronson, and Patrick Leblond, “Another digital divide: The rise of data realms and its implications for the WTO,” *Journal of International Economic Law*, Vol 21, No. 2, 2018., pp. 245-272.

distributed zones of digital transnational hegemony determine production, social and economic forces in the making of digital consumers who are vulnerable and susceptible to digital conditioning by hegemonic and counter-hegemonic initiatives. The neo-Gramscian framework, as discussed, has a projective element that can be used to analyse contemporary US technological hegemony and to some extent Chinese digital counter-hegemony.

### **Conclusion**

Gramscian theories on ideas, institutions, and culture provided the epistemological tools to critically examine political hegemony and potentially counter-hegemony. Gramscian scholars in the 1970s started to re-examine ideas institutions and culture in the west and Robert Cox extended Gramscian critical analysis to international studies by emphasising the role of ideas, institutions, and material capabilities in the making of the hegemonic historic bloc. The Coxian epistemology was extended and enriched by Kees van der Pijl and Stephen Gill who applied critical theory to capitalist class social forces in Europe and the capitalist and neo-liberal global political economy. The Atlantic ruling class was central to van der Pijl's analysis whilst Gill focused on transnational capitalism, Trilateral Commission, and capitalist social forces and its global domination. Randolph Persaud questioned the silence of ethnicity in international relations and Hannes Lacher and Owen Worth highlighted the limitations of the Coxian approach as focused on North American political experience. Nevertheless, Gramscian theory continues to provide a rich framework for academic discourses on contemporary US technological hegemony where Neoliberal capitalism expanded to include the growing technology markets that are based on mostly US companies developing and delivering digital devices, digital social media platforms, and digital services. The digital imitative from the US-led to Chinese counter-responses as rivalries in the global digital space accelerated.

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# The Urgency of Critical Theory Today: Towards Optimism and Renewal in a Neoliberal World

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**Abstract:** This article takes the form of a critical conversation between three generations of critical theorists, examining the role of critical theory in the neoliberal academy: does this sort of intellectual project still have a place in an academic and educational system that tends to favour empirical research and policy-driven projects? Through a discussion of the relationship between critical theory and power, privilege, and positionality, the article addresses the ongoing urgency of such intellectual activities in the present context. The dialogue between the three participants acknowledges critical theory's historical, and continuing, fragility within the university, while elucidating the ways that it can provide a vehicle for challenging dominant forms of power. In doing so, this cross-generational exchange demonstrates that critical theory remains a vital space of rebellion, optimism, and social change.

## Critical Theory, Knowledge Production, and the (Public) University

The first edition of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society* appeared in 1982. The opening editorial rather gloomily identified "an assault on higher education in Britain"<sup>4</sup>, noting "an economic climate in which the trend is towards the 'commodification' of thought"<sup>5</sup>. Dark though this is, the complaint is sharply familiar with anyone working in academia more than three decades on, when instrumentality is at the heart of research directives<sup>6</sup>, government higher education policies are dominated

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4 Featherstone (1982), p. 1.

5 Featherstone (1982), p. 1.

6 See, for instance, Billig (2013).

by the metricization of thought<sup>7</sup>, and a culture of overwork and affective alienation proliferates.<sup>8</sup> Concurrently, Meg Stacey's presidential address to the annual British Sociological Association conference in 1982 recognized that "we are experiencing in this country [...] a serious attack upon the entire knowledge base of the entire society, upon academic freedom and particularly upon the social sciences and sociology among them"<sup>9</sup>. What Stacey's address and the *TCS* editorial have in common – reflected thirty years later – is that attacks on the humanities, the social sciences, sociology, and academia are, ultimately, also attacks on intellectual life. Indeed, *TCS* was founded in order to preserve space for the abstract and for theorizing in an economic and professional landscape that is often structurally and systematically hostile to such work.<sup>10</sup>

This conversation between three generations of critical theorists working in contemporary UK academia examines the vital role of critical theory in challenging the ongoing and entrenched neoliberalization of higher education and intellectual practice – but with an eye to the ways in which this is not a new phenomenon. Through analysing the remit and boundaries of critical theory and its ability to be adapted to new contexts and questions, the need to acknowledge the potential elitism of hegemonic modes of thinking and publishing, and the applicability of critical theory to comprehending and questioning the present circumstances of the university and academic life, this exchange opens up new avenues to collectively rethinking how critical theorists engage with, and may attempt to change, the intellectual and professional fields in which they – and, more generally, researchers in the humanities and social sciences – find themselves situated.

The conversation took place on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2018, over the course of an hour; all three participants have known one another professionally for a number of years. We begin with a brief discussion of successive generations of critical theorists, before moving on to tackle the defini-

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7 See, for example, Beer (2018).

8 See Gill (2009) and Burton (2018a).

9 Stacey (1982), p. 407.

10 See, for instance, Burton (2016) and Santos (2014).

tions of “critical theory” and the extent to which these may be regarded as inclusive or elitist. From here, the conversation turns to the relationship between the structural conditions of the contemporary university and the flourishing (or demise) of critical theory. We end by considering the political function of critical theory and the ways it may be used as a “martial art” – to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s analogy<sup>11</sup> – as well as the possible futures for this as a radical intellectual project or mode of collective resistance to neoliberal incursions to academia and higher education.

### **Generations, Genealogy, and the Unfolding of Critical Theory Today: Definitions, Boundaries, and Borders**

**Sarah Burton (SB):** Let’s begin by discussing our parameters. Do you think there are different generations of critical theory and critical theorists that are very distinct from each other, or are they all merging together – and is there a lot of overlap, or very distinct kind of barriers?

**William Outhwaite (WO):** I think Simon and I are both essentially Frankfurters in our critical theory [*laughter*], but with a broad approach to it. I do tend to stick with the idea of generations of at least Frankfurt critical theory – with Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse in the first generation, Jürgen Habermas in the second, with Albrecht Wellmer (probably), Axel Honneth and Seyla Benhabib in the third, and then people like Simon in the fourth.

**Simon Susen (SS):** It seems to me that, in the current context, the main (that is, most influential and most interesting) figures are Rainer Forst<sup>12</sup>, Martin Saar<sup>13</sup>, Rahel Jaeggi<sup>14</sup>, Robin Celikates<sup>15</sup>, and – of course – Hartmut Rosa<sup>16</sup>. In my view, their work is of exceptional quality – they are the ones who stand out.

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11 See Bourdieu (2001).

12 See Forst (2012 [2007]) and Forst (2013 [2011]).

13 See Saar (2007) and Saar (2013).

14 See Jaeggi (2016 [2005]) and Jaeggi (2018 [2014]).

15 See Celikates (2018 [2009]).

16 See Rosa (2015 [2005]) and Rosa (2019 [2016]).

**WO:** But some people would say, “No, no – Habermas has a radical break from the ‘first generation’ critical theory”<sup>17</sup>. Gordon Finlayson, for example, would say this is “first generation” Starnberg theory, it’s not “second generation” critical theory, which he is doing, at least in his work from the late 1970s onwards. So I’m a traditionalist in that sense of sticking with the four-generational model. But I don’t see it as an evolutionary sequence where each is superior to the last. This journal (*BJCT*) was set up with the aim of reviving interest in the first generation, and there is a stronger view that what we have, since the first generation, is a decline not just in radicalism but also in intellectual quality in critical theory.<sup>18</sup> Personally, I think there are more kinds of overlaps and recurrences back to earlier traditions of theorizing.

**SS:** Yes, I tend to agree. One problem we face here is the extent to which we define “critical theory” – that is, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School – in terms of the scholars who are based at Frankfurt – or involved institutionally in whatever is going on at Frankfurt – and those, like myself, who are based somewhere else, sometimes not only outside Frankfurt but also outside Germany. For instance, Robin Celikates – before taking up his position at the FU (Freie Universität Berlin) – used to be based at the University of Amsterdam, Rahel Jaeggi is based at the HU (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Hartmut Rosa is based at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena (and, as Director of the Max-Weber-Kolleg, at the University of Erfurt), and I am based at City, University of London.

I think commentators who subscribe to more “orthodox” conceptions of “critical theory” don’t regard the scholars I just mentioned as “critical theorists” in the strict sense. Why? Well, because they are not institutionally attached to, let alone based at, Frankfurt in the way other major figures, such as Rainer Forst and Martin Saar, are.

**WO:** Yes, I mean, “Frankfurt” really means a moving or spread-out thing between Germany, other bits of Europe to some extent, and mainly the US.

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17 See Müller-Doohm (2017).

18 See, for example: Bernstein (1995); Osborne (1998); Outhwaite (2017), pp. 5–7; Rose (1981).



**SB:** But then if you're taking that as your definition of what and who counts as "critical theory", you're going to have an extremely exclusive, very bounded, version of what counts as such – which is in itself going to stop it from regenerating, and that's going to be a reason in and of itself to say why critical theory's not taken seriously in wider spaces. Thus, do we need to have a think about being quite so elitist with our definitions?

**WO:** Yes – and you don't have to call yourself a "critical theorist", I think, to count as one. A lot of people doing, say, postcolonial theory might well not really want to identify with critical theory because it's so Eurocentric and so forth in its earlier phases. But it's all part of the same approach essentially.

**SB:** One of the things I was going to bring up is the following question: to what extent do you both see things like feminist theory, various kinds of postcolonial theory, critical race theory, different theories of class – for instance, people like Imogen Tyler and her work on class and classification<sup>19</sup> – as being part of the work of critical theory?

**WO:** Yes, I do.

**SB:** And how does that change the boundaries of critical theory and what it is and what we're doing? What commonalities are there between the sorts of things that you two do, and the sorts of things I would do as a critical race theorist or as a postcolonial theorist, or a feminist...?

**SS:** It seems to me that one major concern that all critical theorists share is an interest in *power relations*, in particular *relations of domination*. [*Murmur of assent from WO.*] That's one thing. And the second major concern that, to my mind, all critical theorists have in common is a belief in the possibility of challenging, if not subverting, these power relations, and a belief in what we may call *emancipation* and, more specifically, *emancipatory practices*. I think where critical theorists often differ – and this takes me to the third point – is the question of whether or not it is possible (and, in fact, desirable) to provide what Habermas would call "normative foundations", which might (or might not) be "context-tran-

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19 See Tyler (2013).

scendent". In my own work, I have been grappling with these issues<sup>20</sup> – and, I believe, the same applies to William's writings<sup>21</sup>.

**WO:** I think, like buses, you can either take a single one from one place to another, or you can change a couple of times in the journey, and it's not a matter of identifying yourself with a particular framework. I think in Germany, certainly, there was a tendency to want to pigeonhole people, and say: "What's your approach?" And you say: "Well, you know, I just do my thing, which is a bit of Marx, a bit of Weber, a bit of Habermas, a bit of Honneth." This, I suspect, reflects a more flexible kind of approach to theory. And that's the point at which it becomes more open to all of these other tendencies, which are also including somebody like Frantz Fanon.<sup>22</sup> I don't know whether you'd count him as a critical theorist. Maybe you should. He's very Hegelian-influenced, but clearly not part of the standard kind of critical theory panoply.

**SB:** This more iterative understanding of how you might use different theories and theorists would permit us to conceive of perspectives such as postcolonialism, critical race theory, and feminism (and similar approaches) as part of a *broader* critical theory and how that might be a thing that links us across generations as well. You can see where you might have affinities with people who are doing very different things to you and coming from a different sort of space. [*Noises of assent from WO and SS.*]

**SS:** Another thing I have noticed is that, within contemporary critical theory, there has been a decisive shift from *social theory* towards *political theory*. For instance, at the critical theory conference that takes place every year in Prague, one gets the impression that it is almost completely dominated by political theory. Granted, there are a few papers on social theory here and there; but, overall, the conference is very much focused on issues in political theory. This, of course, tells us something about

20 See Susen (2007), Susen (2015), Susen (2018a), Susen (2018b), Susen (2020a), and Susen (2020b).

21 See Outhwaite (2006), Outhwaite (2009), Outhwaite (2012), Outhwaite (2017), and Outhwaite (2019).

22 See Fanon (2004 [1961]).

what is going on at Frankfurt at the moment, especially if you consider the influence of seminal scholars such as Forst and Saar.

We should not forget that most, if not all, of those who move in academic circles feel – or, arguably, know – that, in one way or another, their careers are at stake. The annual critical theory conference in Prague is a very good example of this dynamic. A considerable proportion of academics attending this conference are based at (or linked to) the New School in New York or somewhere in Berlin or Frankfurt. It is also pretty obvious that it is, essentially, a “Global North” event. And, as previously mentioned, it is now very much dominated by political theorists. Without a doubt, a conference is shaped not only by substantive issues (that is, the *content* of what is being discussed), but also by the social, demographic, and institutional factors underlying the *context* in which it takes place. Admittedly, there is a fair amount of postcolonial theory discussed at that conference. Most key debates, however, tend to be dominated by Western European and North American scholars. This, one might suggest, is somewhat problematic (to say the least). Amy Allen’s work on “decolonizing the normative foundations of critical theory” is crucial in this regard.<sup>23</sup>

**WO:** And there’s a narrowness I think about political theory and about political science as well. As sociologists, we enjoy the greater freedom of a more cosmopolitan environment.

### **Structures, Disciplines, and the Tenuous Ground of Critical Theory Today**

**SB:** So taking it back to the relationship between critical theory and the conditions of its production – particularly the institutional conditions of its production in contemporary universities – we’ve said that perhaps things haven’t changed quite so much in terms of the viability of critical theory, but things have changed in terms of teaching, workload pressure, the extent of academics’ administrative responsibilities, and suchlike. But is there anything *specific* going on now that reshapes or challenges

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23 See Allen (2016).

the conditions for actually producing critical theory in the universities? Neoliberalism has been a facet of university life for decades.<sup>24</sup> And, of course, there's now the recognition of a particularly vulnerable "academic precariat"<sup>25</sup> – so what, if anything, is particular to our current moment? And how should critical theory respond to these new forms of casualization and neoliberal governance?

The bureaucratization and the metricization of most, if not all, academic disciplines is happening. We may consider here what John Holmwood has written on importer-exporter disciplines.<sup>26</sup> If certain things are valued – particularly empirical work, and particularly what can be said to be very "concretely" sociology and clearly understood in undisrupted discipline-specific terms – then critical theory as a much more interdisciplinary project, as a much more unbounded project, doesn't seem to fit very well within any particular department and therefore doesn't fit in a clear category for something like the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF).

So is there a particular sort of space that's needed for abstract and conceptual work and critical work that you just don't get now?

**SS:** I suppose what it comes down to is that most of us just play along. In my view, this is a classic example of the success of "the dominant ideology"<sup>27</sup> – that is, of an ideology understood not simply as a sort of cognitive and symbolically mediated state of affairs, but, rather, as something that actually affects what we *do* and shapes, if not governs, our everyday *practices*. Let's be honest: in different ways and to different degrees, most of us play along, no matter how "radical" we claim to be. If, for instance, I reflect on my everyday institutional practices, these are pretty conventional. Like most others, I am – if one wants to use this term – largely "complicit".<sup>28</sup> And that is a problem. For example, the moment you apply

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24 See, for instance, Billig (2013), Gill (2009), and Evans (2004).

25 See, for example, Loveday (2018).

26 See, for instance, Holmwood (2010).

27 See Susen (2014) and Susen (2016).

28 Cf. Loick (2018).

for a research grant, you know that you have to push all the right buttons and to tick certain boxes. Hence, you try to “package” your application in such a way that you can “sell” it. And even then it is obviously difficult to obtain funding, because it is what it is – it is *critical theory*. [*Half-laughs.*] You may call it “the preponderance of the object”, “the preponderance of society”, dominated by certain mechanisms, which we may not like, but which shape – if not govern – what we do.

**SB:** Do you find that there’s certain things that you want to write, or certain ways that you want to write or spaces that you want to publish in that you just don’t, because you feel some sort of potential institutional backlash? You might get recognition by your intellectual peers, but what happens in your institution is often a very, very different thing.

**SS:** Yes. I guess, in a way, you have to be strategic. You have to make sure you produce your “REF-able” outputs. Once you have those in the bag, you can basically do whatever you want. For example, I have published several articles in so-called “non-REF-able” journals – that is, journals that are not Scopus-indexed. These journals are not part of the metrics game. When I wrote these pieces, I already had all the articles and books I needed for the REF “in the bag”. Had that not been the case, however, I could not have submitted them to the respective journals, because my Department would have said: “Sorry, this article, regardless of its intellectual merits, is not REF-able.” Obviously, there are tangible (and somewhat disempowering) constraints. I don’t know about your experience, William. Do you just not worry about this kind of thing?

**WO:** I’ve never bothered. I...

**SB:** Do you do things differently now that you’re retired?

**WO:** No, I think I never bothered...I hardly ever published a journal article except invited. [*Half-laughs.*] And I think the one time I did submit an article to a journal, they turned it down because they’d had something rather similar before. So, you know, a university which measured peoples’ output in terms of refereed journals would never have promoted me. [*Laughs.*] I would have retired as a lecturer, I think. I suppose there’s also the more fundamental question of whether the kind of thing

we want to do is capable of being presented in a sort of small-packaged form as a module. I think I'd probably want to say that it can be, and that you can give people the essence of Kant in half an hour, if pressed. And it's worthwhile. And students will take something away from it – there's nothing that is fundamentally inaccessible.

**SB:** I wonder whether there's something as well about the physical conditions of intellectual life today. We've discussed institutional conditions for producing critical theory, but what about the literal institutional fabric and environment for producing critical theory? This is work that is abstract and intense – very conceptual and very much about thinking and needing time and space. I'm quite aware that in our current conditions it's extremely difficult to get any mental calm to do that sort of work. We teach more and more. We have more and more administrative calls on ourselves – which lessens the protracted space that you need to do that kind of reading and that sort of thinking and planning, and I wonder whether you could say a bit about that.

**SS:** I don't know what William's working habits are like, but I do most of my "serious" work from home. I have never been able to do any rigorous intellectual work at the office. I am happy to come in – for doing my teaching, dealing with administrative duties, and having face-to-face contact with my colleagues. In terms of research, sometimes I manage to read draft material when I am at the office. But the creative stuff? I find it very difficult in the "professionalized", and increasingly managerialized, space of the neoliberal university. This is paradoxical, because I actually like coming in a few times a week, since you do get intellectual stimulation from talking to others – notably to colleagues and students. In addition, for most of us, it is important to feel part of something. But I don't know about you, William. Do you feel the same way about this?

**WO:** Yeah, I think the great thing about being an academic is the vacations, there's a place to work. Daniel Bell, when he was asked what's good about being an academic, just said "May, June, July, August". [*Laughter.*]

**SS:** Spot-on (although I do enjoy the rewarding aspects of teaching)!

**SB:** But then this takes us back to structural conditions in terms of casualization and precarity. If you've gone through your Ph.D. and you've taken three or four years to do that, and you don't earn a lot during that – even if you're on a prestigious stipend – and then you're casualized for a few years and you're maybe doing hourly-paid work or you're doing work which is one-year contracts, and you can't plan anything and you can't necessarily rent a great place, that's not great, is it? So your strategy, Simon, presupposes the idea that you *can* work at home. Not everybody can do that, especially if you're precarious and sharing a house and you don't have a lot of cash. There are more and more people at the junior levels in academia who just don't have any money. And so how are they – *we* – supposed to produce substantive and substantial intellectual work?

**WO:** Yeah, if you're on a series of nine-month contracts you don't get paid for May, June, and July.

**SB:** Precisely – you don't get paid for June, July, August. You might get that time to work because you're not employed, but you don't get paid for it, which makes it increasingly difficult. So there must be concern regarding what sort of critical theory we're losing, especially given that the people who are most likely to suffer from casualization, and from precarity, tend to be working-class academics, they tend to be women, to be people of colour. If those people are being lost from critical theory, then that's going to be something that is shaping the future of the work into being more of the "elites" that you get at your Prague conference.

**SS:** Yes, this is one of the contradictions of critical theory conferences. You go there, and you realize that most participants are at least relatively privileged. A lot – if not most – of them have permanent jobs, have a decent income, and are part of – if you like – "the elite". Most of them, but not all of them! Having said that, I went through the same thing for many years: being employed on a short-term contract, year after year, and then hoping to land a permanent position at some point. But, of course, the whole situation creates a sense of anxiety, because you are constantly thinking: "Oh, what is going to happen next?" – You just don't know!

**SB:** Do you think there's a difference between the sort of work you produce now, or that you can produce now, and what you were doing when you were on your fixed-term contract?

**SS:** Undoubtedly. Once you have the luxury of a permanent position, you don't need to worry about getting the next job – at least not to the same extent. In most cases, it's up to you to stay or to move.

**SB:** Moving towards talking about critical theory in contemporary institutions, its longevity and suchlike, where do you think we are at the minute in terms of the tenability of critical theory within the university system? [*Laughter.*]

**WO:** I'm post-institutional, so I'm silent.

**SS:** There is the *teaching* bit, and then there is, if you like, the *research* bit. In terms of teaching, I find it increasingly difficult to teach critical theory, particularly the early stuff. I often find – and I do not mean to be patronizing – that I have to trivialize things, in order to be able to convey some of the key ideas. In my view, it is a contradiction in terms to teach Adorno on the basis of a PowerPoint presentation. Adorno would probably... [*laughs*] – well, it's problematic, to say the least. It's not an easy task, and it just makes me think that maybe we're getting it wrong. Maybe we're holding onto something to which most contemporary undergrads cannot relate. I don't know about your experience – that is, your *teaching* experience...

**WO:** Yes, I know what you mean. I mean, to be fair to Adorno, he did give first-year lectures where he said “this is totally over-simplified but you could say...”, and then produce a beautifully clear sentence, which would be twenty pages of difficult stuff in the book from which it was drawn. I was thinking that in the late 1960s and 1970s we were all saying that Talcott Parsons was impossible to read, but we were reading Althusser and Lacan – all this stuff which was vastly more...but it had a kind of resonance, and that made us prepared to get into it. So I think if there's a way somehow of packaging things to bring out their relevance, you can bridge that gap. But you know, we're talking about people beginning to write nearly 100 years ago. We're sort of far away from that. And further away than they were then from the Kant or Hegel generation.



**SB:** Do you think this is a problem of complexity – that we’re no longer doing things that are tending towards the complex, and towards texture and nuance in universities? Have we got to a situation in which the university is a business and students are customers and consumers, so they don’t really want to be dealing with something that is so complex?

**SS:** I am quite brutal in terms of what I include in my reading lists. Yet, I do try to be as accessible as possible when I teach social theory, especially in the lectures. And I think the key to success, if I can call it that, is to provide the students with examples to which they can relate. The problem, of course, is that a lot of them do *not* read, unless they can access the relevant material on their mobile phones! It seems difficult to convince some of them that reading is important. Sometimes, if you are lucky, ten percent of them do the reading, and then you can pitch it at the right level, so that they can grasp it. But you have to make sure that everybody can understand what you are saying, so they can pass the assignment. Let’s face it: a large proportion of students are instrumental about learning. Consider, for example, Habermas. I must say that it is actually not all that difficult to teach his “theory of communicative action”, because everyone can relate to language. I reckon fifty percent of our students are bi- or trilingual. These multilingual students (as well as most of the monolingual students) have an interest in language. If you make sure you teach it in a way that takes *their* perspective into account (that is, in a way that *they* find interesting, because it resonates with them), then it works *without* having to trivialize the material. Admittedly, it does not always work, but often it does.

**SB:** William, do you feel there’s a big difference in how you would have taught critical theory or even social theory when you were starting out, in the late 1970s/early 1980s versus what you were doing before you retired?

**WO:** Yes. I think towards the end of my teaching career I was certainly packaging stuff much more. There was less time available, it was a short module, it was one term rather than a whole year. And there was pressure to try and find illustrations rather more than perhaps we’d have bothered with in the past.

## The Political Ends of Critical Theory and Questions of Renewal in the Neoliberal Academy

**SB:** Critical theory, with its attention towards things like domination and emancipation, is obviously a deeply political way of thinking, doing, and understanding of the world. It seems that – given the catastrophic employment prospects, and economic, environmental, and political conditions – critical theory should be something central to the university. And yet, it feels like it's not central to the university at the minute. We've talked about things like the *TCS* editorial<sup>29</sup> and the Meg Stacey BSA address<sup>30</sup>, and whether there's actually been any change in terms of if critical theory has always been kind of marginalized, or if we now have a particular new and difficult sort of position. Where do we place *ourselves* in terms of that, do you think?

**WO:** I remember when *TCS* was being set up, SAGE must have written to me and said "what do you think of this proposal?". And I said "great idea, I'm not sure it will be a big success". [*Laughter.*] And it has been. So already then, there was a sort of anxiety about a theoretically oriented journal. So yes, I don't think that in those ways the scene is that much worse now than it was quite a long time ago.

**SS:** The same applies to the journal I co-edit with Bryan S. Turner – the *Journal of Classical Sociology*. One prominent British social theorist once told me that, when *JCS* was launched, a lot of sociologists thought it was not going to survive – mainly because they thought it was just going to cover Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. But somehow we did survive, which is great – possibly because of our (deliberately) broad definition of "classicality"!

**WO:** I think the other thing that's happening is that sociology is being increasingly sort of pulled apart in other directions. Political science, particularly, is tending to colonize areas of social policy. So public policy suddenly becomes a subsection of political science, and is kind of coordi-

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<sup>29</sup> Featherstone (1982).

<sup>30</sup> Stacey (1982).

nated in a very much tighter sort of way, leaving the sociologists with an interest in social policy not knowing quite where they're supposed to fit.

**SS:** I think "human rights" is another example. At City-Sociology we ran several modules on human rights for many years. Eventually, however, these were moved to another department at the university.

**WO:** And those things are somehow more marketable. I mean, at Newcastle, Politics was much, much bigger and more popular than Sociology. And the students would come in to do Politics with Sociology and would then sort of say "can I drop the Sociology..."

And sociologists I suppose, have just not been terribly good at standing up for the specificity of their discipline, because actually we don't think it does have a particular specificity. I mean, it's a much broader enterprise than that.

**SB:** We've got a bit of a paradox here, in that we're constantly throwing up our hands and saying how neoliberal and instrumental universities have become, how very difficult it is to get any funding for social theory or critical theory projects. But at the same time, you're talking about the start of *TCS* and whether it was going to survive – and of course it has, and it's a very established and prestigious journal. Social theory itself continues to be established and prestigious: it's got a whole stream at the BSA annual conference. It has foundations, it dominates the sociology canon, it has a lot of space.<sup>31</sup>

Are we making too much of this – are we creating a problem where there actually isn't one? Is it really qualitatively different, or are we just spending a lot of time wrapping ourselves in knots?

**WO:** Yes, and I think partly again, we don't want to treat social theory as a specialism with its own entity and its own resource base and so forth, because we see it as broader. And if you look at the way social theory is defined in the US, it's much more narrow, I think. When I was editing the *Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*<sup>32</sup>, we had Americans saying "It's a great dictionary, but you've put in all this stuff

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31 See Burton (2015).

32 Outhwaite (2003).

about the family. What's the family got to do with social thought?" [Chuckling.]

**SB:** Does critical theory rely on exclusivity and intellectual prestige to gain traction in academia, in university spaces? How does that come about?

**SS:** When conducting my "Recherche doctorale libre" at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, France, where Luc Boltanski was my care-taking supervisor, I noticed something really peculiar: a lot of French "big names" – if you want to call them that – have a tendency to write in a rather obscure language, because – if they teach at research-focused institutions, such as the EHESS – they do not communicate with undergraduate students. They might be exchanging ideas with a few postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows, but they are part of these "expert tribes", in which they speak a very codified language, which is accessible only to insiders. A commendable aspect of undergraduate teaching – as most academics working in British universities will know – is that we are obliged to explain our ideas in a clear, concise, and comprehensible manner. For obvious reasons, the stuff we lecture has to be more or less accessible to our undergraduate students. A lot of research-focused academics I met in France do not face the same challenge. It seems to me that what and how we *teach* has a significant impact on the way we *write* and, in a more fundamental sense, on the way we *think*...

**SB:** You always strike me as quite good at doing that, William – that your writing's really accessible. [Noise of agreement from SS.] The piece you wrote for *Network* on the European Union<sup>33</sup> was very accessible. It was very clear, very precise, but it also had a lot of intellectual underpinning to it. And I wonder if there's an onus on people like us to be writing things like that – short pieces that are very easily accessible.

**WO:** Yes. At the beginning of my career, somebody said "you're a popularizer, William" [laughter]. I didn't like it at the time, but it's nice to be able to do that, among other things.

**SB:** Returning to the former part of Simon's remarks, do you think that part of the reason that critical theory might be losing a bit of its purchase

33 See Outhwaite (2018).

in universities is that we're a bit comfortable and we're a bit privileged?

**SS:** Yes, I think this is part of what you may call "a general depoliticization". Perhaps this is a sweeping statement. I did feel, however, that both the students and the members of staff I encountered in Mexico – where I spent a year as an international student – were more politicized than their British counterparts, although this was a while ago and things might have changed.

**WO:** I remember seeing on a wall in San Cristóbal in Chiapas somebody had painted, "the solution, social sciences" [*laughs*]. I doubt anybody would do that in this country.

**SS:** No!

**WO:** I mean, a lot of students now, their career prospects are pretty dire. But I suppose it's true that their situation at a particular time is fairly comfortable. I mean, maybe the smaller size of a lot of UK universities and the smaller size still of seminar groups and so on provides a slightly cosier environment. Whether that should depoliticize people I don't know. I think the difficulty with present generations of students really is seeing any connection between the sort of catastrophic job prospects and the catastrophic environmental background and so forth and anything *they* can do, other than signing online petitions and so forth.

**SB:** What about the idea of critical theory as praxis – Bourdieu's phrasing that sociology is a martial art? Considering what we were saying about the politicization/depoliticization of universities, academics, and students, what's the role of critical theory in promoting a more politicized environment and bringing people together in forms of solidarity? One of the things I noticed during the UCU strike [fourteen strike days from 22 February 2018 to 20 March 2018] was that we all started to talk to each other a bit more, to have more political conversations about changing the university and about how dissatisfied we were, in a way which was much deeper and much more significant and more radical than the sorts of conversations that we would have while we're making a cup of coffee at work with each other. I wonder whether you both can see a role for critical theory re-emerging in the neoliberal university through some

of these struggles of solidarity and things? Could it be a foundational or practical element of this struggle?

**WO:** Yes, practice was always a weak point of first generational critical theory, and I guess has continued to be. And yet, there is a kind of engagement. You use the Bourdieusian phrase “martial art”. Bourdieu has been rebuked, I think wrongly, for being too deterministic and stressing structural determination. But then a lot of people who focus on those determinations are also very concerned to transcend them, as he was. So yes, I think those kinds of solidarities presumably do change the kind of work that people want to do, or the way they understand their work.

**SB:** But maybe those conditions, where we start to talk about domination and power in much more open ways with each other – whereby critical theory suddenly seems more relevant in a neoliberal and instrumental institution, rather than being hived off and not considered with value, monetary value and that sort of currency – that maybe there’s room for introducing critical theory elements into those sorts of conversations again.

**WO:** Yes, I mean, it breaks down the division between “I’m doing my union work for an hour” and “then I’m going to write my paper”.

**SB:** It brings that whole “the personal is political” back into play.

**SS:** Some people were cynical about the strike. You might say: “People are on strike because it’s going to affect their situation, it’s going to affect their income. It’s because they have personal or individual interests to go on strike.” It reaffirms, if you like, the predominance of the neoliberal system. I think that people who, for this reason, were cynical about the strike had a point.

**WO:** You’re not *allowed* to have a political strike against neoliberalism...

**SS:** Exactly [*laughter*]. Exactly.

**WO:** ...in the UK.

**SS:** I can only talk about City – I must confess that I had mixed feelings about the strike. On the one hand, it generated a sense of solidarity and a sense of community; suddenly, you got to know people with whom you hadn’t interacted before, especially those from other departments.

I remember talking to colleagues in Psychology and International Politics to whom I had never even spoken before the strike. In that sense, it was great! On the other hand, it was somewhat illusory. It was sort of “well, well...”. Then the strike was suddenly over, you moved on, and you went back to your “conventional way of functioning”.

**SB:** There was a sense in a way it was handled towards the end that we just went back to a reset.

**SS:** Yes, that’s true. Generally, I notice that especially informal encounters, rather than institutional environments, *really* shape what you do, how you think, and what kind of work you produce. Of course, these informal encounters are often embedded in institutional environments. Still, these encounters – which escape, at least partly, the logic of social institutions – tend to be the most productive, and the most inspiring, sources of inspiration.

**SB:** On this structural-institutional level, employment as a social or critical theorist is itself very precarious. It’s very difficult to present yourself as a social theorist and then get a job.

**SS:** That’s right. It’s a risk, it’s a big risk.

**SB:** Given this landscape, let’s think, finally, about critical theory’s role and significance within contemporary academia. It’s often seen as a very intellectually-oriented work, and I’m wondering if we could end by saying a little bit about the way that it is, or isn’t, understood with value and legitimacy within academia – and also maybe link that to some of the wider public sphere, media, cultural interpretations of the significance or the applicability of the intellectual. We’re living in a post-Brexit, post-Trump age where – according to people like Michael Gove – “we don’t need experts anymore”.<sup>34</sup> Equally, right-wing positions have elided ideas like “post-truth” and “fake news” with schools of thought such as critical race theory and queer theory in attempts to undermine them as both ridiculous and predatory.<sup>35</sup>

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34 See Burton (2018b).

35 See Robbins (2020).

What's the relationship between what's going on in a political, media and cultural sense and what's going on in terms of universities? Is there just a general denigration of the intellectual, where it's seen as too privileged, too airy-fairy, too unconnected to peoples' everyday lives? Is the (alleged) devaluation of critical theory in the university part of a crisis of neoliberalism in the university, or is it part of a broader crisis of the intellectual and expertise in society?

**SS:** It seems to me that there are three things that need to happen in order for critical theory not only to survive but also to have a positive impact on what is going on in society in general and in academia in particular. *First*, we need to recognize that – as highlighted in Luc Boltanski's work – critique, far from being reducible to an epistemic privilege of scientists or experts, is shaped and articulated by “ordinary” people in their everyday lives. In other words, we need to establish a link between critical theory and social praxis. We need to explore the ways in which critique is used in everyday life. As “ordinary” actors, we are not necessarily experts. Yet, as non-experts, we are able to make valid and insightful points about all sorts of things, when engaging with the world.

**SB:** And re-defining the idea of what an expert is within that.

**SS:** That's right. This is not to deny that experts are important and that they may be able to provide us with powerful epistemic frameworks in certain areas. We do need them, and there is an epistemic gap between “ordinary” and “scientific” ways of engaging with the world – there's no doubt about it. Yet, to use Boltanski's phrase, *we have to take people seriously*. So that's one thing. Of course, you could suggest that scholars such as Habermas<sup>36</sup> and Forst<sup>37</sup> deliver on this promise, precisely because they assume that communicative action or justification is something in which we *all* engage, on a daily basis, when attributing meaning to, or justifying, our actions. Rosa also delivers on this, because – according to his sociological framework – the search for “resonance” is an integral component

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36 See Habermas (1987a [1981]) and Habermas (1987b [1981]).

37 See Forst (2012 [2007]) and Forst (2013 [2011]).



of our everyday lives.<sup>38</sup> So that's one thing. We need to accept that there is an epistemic gap between "ordinary" and "scientific" knowledge, but *without* endorsing a patronizing attitude. Ordinary actors are equipped with important – if you like, species-constitutive – competences, such as critical, reflective, imaginative, and moral capacities.

The *second* thing, and that's a tricky one, is to engage with "the world out there". If we, as critical theorists, fail accomplish this, then people "out there" will not want to relate to critical theory! And who would blame them? For instance, I think that one of the reasons why Žižek is a bit of a "pop star" is that people can relate to him. They find him funny and entertaining – a trickster! You might not always agree with what he has to say, but people can – and do – relate to him. And not just intellectuals! [*Noise of agreement from WO.*] In Germany, Rosa, although he is not in the same category as Žižek, is now a "rising star", precisely because people can relate to what he is saying, especially with regard to "experiences of resonance" [*Resonanzerfahrungen*]. He is not just talking about "cognition" or "communicative rationality" in abstract terms. His approach, although it is – in my view – conceptually very sophisticated, is much less technical than, say, Habermas's *TCA* or Forst's theory of justification. Arguably, "resonance" is something to which everyone can relate. "Resonance" resonates with us! It seems to me that, unless we put our finger on some of the key issues to which we can relate – not just as experts but also, crucially, as everyday actors –, we have already lost the battle. This is not a matter of trivializing critical theory, but, rather, of engaging with what is going on in the world.

The *third* task, which builds on the other two points, is to speak a language that does not end up being a "private language".<sup>39</sup> Often it is. Let's be clear: I am partly guilty of that myself. It is important, however, that we, as critical theorists, speak a language that is accessible – not just to "group members" or to those who are already part of the circle, the clique, as it were, but also to the wider academic community and,

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38 See Rosa (2019 [2016]). Cf. Susen (2020b).

39 See Felski (2013).

although I have reservations about the use of this term, to “the general public”. Granted, this is not an easy task!

### **Concluding Remarks:**

#### **Complicity, Criticality, and Fashioning (Better) Futures**

The cross-generational conversation above suggests both scope and space for critical theorists across disciplines, geographies, and generations to connect, and to create, in ways that are equal parts dynamic and daring. Despite this, we would appear to share the recognition that the position of critical theory – and, more broadly, intellectuals and intellectual practice – has been tenuous in the academy and the structural composition of universities for some time and is becoming more precarious.<sup>40</sup> These working conditions of the contemporary university have prompted repeated demands for a more humane and generous academy<sup>41</sup>, and it is clear from our fruitful exchange that a key aspect of critical theory enduring and thriving within contemporary academia is open dialogue and support across generations of thinkers. We could draw here on David Inglis’s identification of a dangerous “presentism”<sup>42</sup> in sociology and suggest that a certain historical vigilance is vital in maintaining the conditions necessary for both the making and the productive use of critical theory. This analytical position is essential to comprehending the machinations and effects of past events, systems, and cultures, while positioning ourselves to recognize the subtle distinctions of our current moment. What is especially apparent in this respect is the necessity of careful reconsideration and reconceptualization of what it means to perform academic work in “public” and as “public intellectuals”.<sup>43</sup> We have recently seen the manipulation, and arguably wilful misunderstanding, of critical theory – particularly with respect to race and (trans)gender conversa-

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40 See Back (2018) and Gill (2015).

41 See Gill (2018) and Lynch (2010).

42 See Inglis (2014).

43 See Burawoy (2005).

tions.<sup>44</sup> Critical theory's noted focus on power and power relations places it as consistently fundamental to everyday lives *and* macro-level social, political, and economic debates. Securing traction for critical theory in the academy means demonstrating its relevance to social life, but also necessitates working with an awareness of how such theorization is received and understood by "the general public". This itself requires us to think and to act boldly, to resist instrumental forms of "impact", and to work in cross-generational solidarity against further neoliberal incursions on intellectual practice by cultures of precarity, bureaucracy, and managerialism. As this conversation shows, these possibilities are achievable and rewarding – and the first steps in crafting futures that offer hope, optimism, and the ability to resist and to rebuild in neoliberal times.

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### **Dedication**

The authors would like to dedicate this piece to three recently deceased thinkers who have been at the sharp edge of developing critical theory as a vital and lively intellectual project: Robert Fine, David Held, and Couze Venn.

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44 See Trilling (2020).

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# Explorations in Philosophy and Theology: Agamben and Vico

James J. Chriss<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The basic aim of this paper is to discuss the thought of Giambattista Vico and Giorgio Agamben in relation to the development of western philosophy and science. The nearly three-century span of time bookending the eras of their writing encompasses not only broad changes in the intellectual and creative temperament of western thought across the periods of their active writing, but also the shifting nature of academic fields especially as this concerns the rise of the human and social sciences beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century. The place of theology within this field has been especially volatile as it was in ascendancy early on, subdued substantially with the advent of philosophical and sociological positivism, and more recently has reemerged as a vibrant force with the advent of numerous post- discourses, including of course the postsecular. In the end, speculation about what all this means acknowledges Herbert Spencer's observation that there are two great regions of knowledge—the Known and the Unknown—and that whatever further progress is made in addressing the issues raised here will reflect this truth.

## Introduction

Giorgio Agamben has become one of the most celebrated philosophers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He produces a steady stream of new writings to Stanford University Press, and mixes hearty doses of theology with philosophy, sociology, law, and political science informed by the likes of Schmitt, Heidegger, Benjamin, and Foucault. His writing is simultaneously dense and accessible, but this sort of seeming contradiction is a motif strewn throughout his work. Agamben is a moving target, a stream of thought and analysis in constant motion much like the be-

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coming—rather than the stable, completed being—of the Hegelian dialectic. He seems to be trundling down the same path of social enquiry as fellow countryman Giambattista Vico, although he rarely acknowledges him in his writings. Vico was highly attentive to words and the history of vocabulary and concepts within science, theology, and everyday life. Agamben studies and plays with words much like Vico did in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, with Vico proclaiming back then that he had developed a new science of history and human society based upon his musings on poetry, art, theology, philology, philosophy, and jurisprudence. There is a thick strand of similarity binding the projects of the two, and it appears in many respects that Agamben is simply an updating of Vico.

This is not meant to denigrate Agamben; indeed, being described intellectually as analogous to the great Vico could only be construed as a compliment. Of course, Agamben is more inclined toward deconstruction than Vico, but Vico cannot be blamed for this because before Hegel there was no sense—that is, no logical sense—of bringing event and its negation into a totality whereby one produces or implies the other. Derrida made a career of this, elevating social thought to a really strange level somewhat on par with Kabbalist mysticism.<sup>2</sup> Vico is much more a rationalist than Agamben even as Vico is described by Isaiah Berlin as an important critic of Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>3</sup> This is understood insofar as the avowed father of the Enlightenment, Descartes, pressed reason into the service of proving even the existence of God, which Vico found inane. Here, Vico unwittingly uncovers the limits of propositional thought<sup>4</sup> which later informed versions of deconstructive critical theory whether in the milder form of Adorno or the more aggressive, totalizing forms of Derrida or Deleuze.<sup>5</sup>

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2 See, e.g., Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I am*, ed. M.-L. Mallet, trans. D. Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

3 Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

4 Martin Jay, *Splinters in Your Eye* (London: Verso, 2020).

5 See especially Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capital-*

### Italian Philosophy

Over the years there have been a few attempts to study the complementary of Vico's and Agamben's thought, and some of the more successful of these have been carried out by Italian writers. There has been a longstanding project, in diverse fields of inquiry, examining national character or culture in the production of intellectual thought and social outcomes more generally. Indeed, at a specific point in time a nation may be described as acting almost as a unified, corporate body, whether in the preparation for war; concerns over trade, immigration, or tourism; or the protection of cultural elements (such as language) which are perceived to be under assault or subject to misappropriation. This points to recognition that a country may be characterized by a "spirit of the times" (*Zeitgeist*), a concept which can be bundled with such cognates as nationalism and populism.<sup>6</sup>

For example, Emile Durkheim argued that specific social forces—here specifically, levels of social integration and social regulation—produce certain outcomes (here, suicide rates) in particular populations or national traditions which are stable and perduring over time.<sup>7</sup> Max Weber argued that a Protestant work ethic was associated with the rise of capitalism in western society. And Richard Münch argues that different national traditions within sociology produce distinctive theories aligning with salient or central features of a society whether historical, cultural, economic, or intellectual. In language very close to Wittgenstein's<sup>8</sup> notion of "language game," Münch argues that the "game" of sociological

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*ism and Schizophrenia*, translated by B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

- 6 See, e.g., Monika Krause, "What is *Zeitgeist*? Examining Period-Specific Cultural Patterns," *Poetics* 76, 2019, 1-10, and Cas Mudde, "The Populist *Zeitgeist*," *Government and Opposition* 39 (4), 2004, 541-563.
- 7 Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, translated by J. Spaulding and G. Simpson (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951 [1897]).
- 8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953).

discourse is played according to different and distinct national rules, i.e., the British sociological game is characterized by organicism, liberalism, empiricism, and unionism, while the American game is characterized by economism, instrumentalism, voluntarism, and pragmatism.<sup>9</sup>

Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito argues that certain aspects of the national history of Italy has produced a distinctive tradition of philosophical thought stretching from Dante and Bruno to Machiavelli, Vico, Croce, and on through to Agamben in the contemporary era.<sup>10</sup> Esposito acknowledges the earlier work of Bertrando Spaventa, who in 1862 published *Italian Philosophy in its Relations with European Philosophy*.<sup>11</sup> Several decades before Durkheim, Spaventa noted that, in comparison to modern urban society, the primitive society, as a result of its being relatively small, isolated, and culturally homogeneous, attains high levels of solidarity and similarity among its members. Hence, the thoughts and practices emanating from such societies could be characterized as a unified spirit, that is, as a robust albeit primitive nationalism or even a “social mind.”<sup>12</sup> Spaventa suggests that the two great national spirits of antiquity were the Indian and the Greek.

This early solidarity of a unified spirit binding the people of a nation is weakened somewhat in the transition to the modern urban society characterized by high population density, greater openness to the outside world, and the type of cultural heterogeneity which Durkheim later came to describe as the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity.<sup>13</sup> As a result, notions of *Zeitgeist*, nationalism, or populism become more

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9 Richard Münch, *Sociological Theory: From the 1850s to the 1920s* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1994), 14.

10 Roberto Esposito, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*, translated by Z. Hanafi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

11 Bertrando Spaventa, *La filosofia italiana nelle sue relazioni con la filosofia europea*, edited by G. Gentile (Bari: Laterza and Sons, 1908 [1862]).

12 See James Chriss, “Giddings and the Social Mind,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 6 (1), 2006, 123-144.

13 Emile Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society*, translated by W.D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1984 [1893]).

tenuous. This modernist fragmentation of an earlier unified national spirit of solidarity appears concomitant to inexorable movements toward cultural heterogeneity, increasing specialization in the division of labor, and the growth of identity politics and political partisanship in general, the latter represented most saliently in the friend-enemy distinction of Carl Schmitt.<sup>14</sup>

Esposito notes that unlike most of the nations falling under sway of nationalized state-formation which took its course across the Occident beginning with the Enlightenment, Italy was fragmented and largely decentralized.<sup>15</sup> In other words, Italy formed outside of the nation and the state. Even into the modern era, Italy continued to be isolated relative to other western nations because of its language—which unlike English and French did not travel well within intellectual and popular culture circles—and also because of its cultural closure during the period of fascism.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, these historical experiences exerted influences on Italian writers, scholars, and cultural producers to which Esposito turned his attention.

### Philology and Fables

Vico argues that the earliest oral communications were of the poetic form, which in turn gave rise to myths and fables.<sup>17</sup> For example, since early man was ignorant of the true cause of thunderbolts, there was a tendency to give animate existence to the natural world. Hence, the sky could be perceived as being alive, including the ability to send down lightning bolts on occasion. This was the foundation of the gentile nations.<sup>18</sup> Jove became the supreme being of all the world, and the articulate language

14 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translated by G. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

15 Roberto Esposito, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*, translated by Z. Hanafi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

16 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

17 Max Horkheimer, "Vico and Mythology," *New Vico Studies* 5, 1987, 63-76.

18 Giambattista Vico, *Vico: Selected Writings*, edited and translated by L. Pompa (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 141.

that gave rise to early poetic fables began in onomatopoeia, one-word phrases that stood as mimeses of the sounds of things which attracted attention. This is the child-like beginnings of the great empires emerging since the time of the ancients, and today children still revel in creating such words.<sup>19</sup> This is also why children are more adept than older persons at learning languages.<sup>20</sup> As Vico noted, the name Jove was derived from the Latin *Ious*, that is, the roar of thunder, while the Greeks named Zeus from the hiss of lightning. Later, exclamations as points of emphasis were added to words, hence the sound of Jove casting a thunderbolt could be *pa!*, and when repeated (*papa!*) would be attributable to Jove as the “father of men and gods.”<sup>21</sup>

This philology was of a piece with Vico’s theory of the invention of language, letters, and history, with Benjamin much later describing philology as the early attempt to make a record of the world in all of its finery and details, some of which involved flourishes of magic and other embellishments.<sup>22</sup> In one sense philology could be seen as associated with mythology, according to the concept of *Aufhebung* from Hegel (e.g., sublation). That is to say, philology could be viewed as a “critical mythology”—not a direct, pristine, or orthodox mythology—which thereby illustrates its correspondence with poetry. Agamben’s work, building upon Vico—albeit indirectly and unspoken most of the time—is a celebration of the word, and since words are contained in books—indeed, books rely on the printed word for their being—we can understand the linkage between the philological and human and, hence, between, philology and philosophy as was continually worked out by Vico, Agamben, and others.<sup>23</sup> Vico’s philosophy centers on maker’s knowledge,

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19 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, translated by L. Heron (London: Verso, 1993a).

20 Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, translated by M. Sullivan and S. Whitsitt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

21 Vico, *Selected Writings*, p. 142.

22 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, translated by J. Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

23 Martin G. Eisner, “The Return to Philology and the Future of Literary Crit-

symbolized by his central concept of *verum-factum*, which is the idea that the true (*verum*) is what is made (*factum*) and vice versa.<sup>24</sup> Axiom X of his *Third New Science* makes explicit Vico's connection between philosophy and philology: "Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true (*il vero*); philology observes the authority of human will, whence comes consciousness of the certain (*il certo*)."<sup>25</sup>

Agamben does indeed acknowledge Vico here in admitting that his approach is "In accordance with Vico's definition, which numbers 'poets, historians, orators, grammarians' among philologists," even as he demurs on Vico's "proof" that there were mutually enforcing errors on the part of both philosophers and philologists.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, according to Vico, the philosophers failed adequately to verify their reasoning with the authority of the philologists, while the philologists failed to verify their authority with the reasoning of the philosophers.<sup>27</sup> Vico devotes a great deal of time attempting to rectify this impasse between reason and authority, and from Agamben's vantage point almost 300 years later not much progress has been made. This harkens back to the continual battle to secure foundations for knowledge and authority, which plays out in the political realm over how the sovereign—who is given power to rule over a people and make decisions on their behalf (the exercise of sheer will)—is held to some standard of conduct via such mechanisms as the separation of powers or binding ideas such as the mystical norm above all norms guiding the noble statesman (e.g., the *Grundnorm* of Kant's Categorical Imperative).

### Oaths and Commands

As part of the latter, there is also the oath, which has its origins in fidelity to a supreme being, that is, the profession of faith, and which is still

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icism: Reading the Temporality of Literature in Auerbach, Benjamin, and Dante," *California Italian Studies* 2, 2011, 1.

24 Vico, *Selected Writings*, p. 51.

25 *Ibid.*, 162.

26 Agamben, *Infancy and History*, p. 147.

27 Vico, *Selected Writings*, pp. 162-163.

present in secular society (e.g., the oath of office most politicians take, the swearing in of witnesses at trial, etc.).<sup>28</sup> Of course, much of this is carried out through language which itself provides the backdrop of solidarity among those speaking the same language,<sup>29</sup> to the extent that oaths mark obligations of central actors as well as the general solemnity of affairs as these come to be characterized arising first in religion and then in law. Informed by Vico, Agamben seems content with approaches to this broader philosophical enigma contained in the writings of Schmitt, Heidegger, Benjamin, Derrida, and Foucault to name the most direct sources.

Agamben traces the beginning of the oath to the end of the sixth century BCE, to Greek, Roman, and Hebrew antiquity.<sup>30</sup> The oath entails the testimony of the gods in securing and stabilizing human relations toward the objects or symbols to which the oath refers. Even though the oath “is the most ancient thing, no less ancient than the gods,”<sup>31</sup> the oath need not refer always or in the first instance to the theological or religious. As discussed, above, even into modernity the oath continues to be used in government and other official affairs to presumably secure adherence of practitioners (governmental, professional, or within the context of interpersonal relations) to ideal or expected standards of conduct. For example, in Genesis (21:22-34) Abraham makes a pact with Abimelech to solve a disagreement that had arisen over Abraham’s concern that servants of Abimelech had stolen a well of water from him. Even to this day, the place where the covenant they made at Beersheba is known as the Seventh Well.<sup>32</sup>

Agamben’s assertion is that the oath is defined by the correspondence between words and action, and with the utterance of the oath a promise

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28 See Ladislav Örsy, *The Profession of Faith and the Oath of Fidelity* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1990).

29 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, translated by T. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

30 Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, translated by A. Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011a).

31 *Ibid.*, 19.

32 Itzhak Benyamini, *A Critical Theology of Genesis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 137.



is made by the oath-taker to carry out the duties so sworn to.<sup>33</sup> This not only binds participants in the oath event to each other under the watchful eye of God, or the angels, or the magistrate, or the bailiff—thereby securing and maintaining social solidarity—but also brings greater predictability and order to social life, including predictable negative consequences for failure to carry out duties as prescribed.

Agamben expands on the status of the oath in his discussion of the connection between rules and law, particularly as these have been formulated within the “highest poverty” of monastic life.<sup>34</sup> Agamben turns to scholastic philosopher Henry of Ghent, who contemplated whether a transgression of penal law is necessarily a sin and gave the example of the monastic rule that prohibits speaking after compline.

In his theory of communicative action, Habermas utilizes the speech act theory of Austin and Searle (with some important modifications) to identify an important category of speech act associated with the validity claim of normative rightness, which he calls “regulatives.” Regulative speech acts are future-oriented even as they arise in the present by speakers in a situation who tell of, and possibly demand that, a particular state of affairs shall emerge according to the content of the communication. Regulative speech acts, then, appear as either “*elementary imperative sentences* (as in commands) or *elementary intentional sentences* (as in promises).”<sup>35</sup>

Habermas’s notion of regulative speech acts that are forward-looking, as they seek to bring about an ideal future state of affairs consistent with the content of the oath, promise, or command, is compatible with Agamben’s treatment, even as he (Agamben) leaves commands and promises (oaths) to separate discussions. Agamben’s discussion of the command is instructive for understanding many other aspects of his philosophical project.

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33 Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, p. 21.

34 Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013b).

35 Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, p. 309 (emphases in original).

Agamben paid attention to language and its etymology, and for our purposes here we will focus on his work on the word “command.”<sup>36</sup> We can start with the Greek word ἀρχή, which can mean origin, principle, authority, rule, or command depending on usage. We say it in English as *arche*, such as in the term “archaeology,” which is the study of ancient or buried artifacts for purposes of understanding past civilizations. The emphasis is on origins or beginnings.

The rendering of ἀρχή as “command” points toward something—here, an utterance or verbalization—that starts something else, that puts things into motion and to which beginnings or origins can be traced. Everything emanates from this original command, for example, in the theological realm the universe is created upon God’s command that “Let there be light.” There is some kind of agent that has power, authority, or will, appearing in the world at a particular place and a particular time for purposes of bringing a particular state of affairs into existence, and the command “starts the ball rolling,” as it were. So, it makes sense that this ἀρχή can simultaneously mean origins and command. Things start with commands.

This ties back to political constitutions. Constitutions are founding documents and there is a tendency to ascribe divinity to them.<sup>37</sup> Constitutions are shot through with differing and conflictual political interpretations about their meaning to citizens of modern societies. A conservative or right-leaning interpretation would treat constitutions as sacred, founding documents, while a progressive or left-leaning interpretation would see constitutions as living documents which must be made meaningful and relevant to current inhabitants of a political community. The conservative view sees the constitution as generating a command that speaks across the ages with a unitary voice that makes sense of all possible things—legal, social, cultural, political, economic, and psychological—in effect, se-

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36 Giorgio Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, translated by A. Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

37 Sanford Levinson, *Constitutional Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

curing a shared understanding of reality. This conservative or originalist position contrasts with a progressive or contextualist position which cares less about the original intent of framers of the constitution—indeed, critics would claim that ferreting out such original intent from documents is futile—emphasizing instead constitutions as living documents which must be interpreted according to frameworks of understanding tethered to the present rather than to an irretrievable past.

This is a deeply political dispute, pitting those who believe constitutions are founding, even sacred documents which authoritatively speak and command across the ages, on one side, against those who believe constitutions are contextualized to present circumstances and which can be used as guides for solving legal and social issues in the here and now, on the other. Indeed, the language that describes this left-right political split is illustrative of the dispute, as conservatives seek to conserve the past maintaining continuity up to and including the present, while progressives want to deal with current challenges and make modifications to accommodate social, cultural, technological, and other changes of which the founders could never have dreamt.

In his discussion of Plotinus' place in Agamben's thought, Mårten Björk points out that Agamben uses Plotinus to help him create an analytic of modalities for modern philosophy, specifically, recommending that the subjective tense (hypotheticals such as "I hope," "I wish," or even "I command") lies behind any attempts to deal with imperatives and associated forms of speech as developed by Habermas and the speech act theorists.<sup>38</sup> By the time of his *Use of Bodies*, Agamben had merged Plotinus with Kabbalistic mysticism to arrive at an ontologically defensible distinction between being, on the one hand, and modality, on the other.<sup>39</sup> It was Gershom Scholem, according to Agamben, who clarified the relationship between Plotinus' One (a supreme totality or unity containing

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38 Mårten Björk, "Plotinus," pp. 186-192 in A. Kotsko and C. Salzani (eds.) *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

39 Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, translated by A. Kotsko. Stanford, (CA: Stanford University Press, 2016b).

no divisions and the Kabbalists' *En-sof* ("without end" or "infinity").<sup>40</sup> In extending Plato's eternal forms to the singular unity and totality of the One, Plotinus goes beyond ontotheology to a meontotheology, which is the One beyond being and hence grounded in non-being, that is, meon.<sup>41</sup>

### Matthew Arnold and Messianic Time

This is also apropos to Agamben's discussion of the split or the scission between poetry and philosophy, a split central to western culture since Plato's declaration of the "ancient enmity" between the two.<sup>42</sup> Reflecting Vico's position, Agamben goes on to argue that authentic poetry is directed toward knowledge while philosophy is directed toward joy.<sup>43</sup> This is messianicism derived from the Abrahamic covenant,<sup>44</sup> a position summarized by Matthew Arnold who, citing from the Old Testament (primarily from Proverbs, Psalms, Zachariah, Job, Jeremiah, and Isaiah), submits overwhelming evidence of the central theme of the Hebrews, this being that righteousness is happiness, and that he is happy who fears and trusts in the Eternal (God).<sup>45</sup> And further, from Job xxviii 28, "The fear of the Eternal, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil, that is

40 Ibid., p. 162. As mentioned earlier, Agamben's work is broadly influenced by Benjamin, and Benjamin in turn was influenced by Scholem's interpretation of the Kabbalah as well as Neoplatonists such as Plotinus. It is probably not farfetched to argue along with Ian Almond that Benjamin, in his "The Task of the Translator," already did the sort of synthesizing of Plotinus and the Kabbalah toward which Agamben was striving. See Ian Almond, "Different Fragments, Different Vases: A Neoplatonic Commentary on Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" *Heythrop Journal* 43 (2), 2002, 185-198.

41 See Conor Cunningham, "The Difference of Theology and Some Philosophies of Nothing." *Modern Theology* 17 (3), 2001, 290.

42 Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, translated by R.L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xvi.

43 Ibid., p. xvii.

44 See J. Gerald Janzen, "The Bible and Our Social Institutions: A Theoretical Perspective," *Interpretation* 27 (3), 1973 and Vassilios Paipais, "'Already/Not Yet': St. Paul's Eschatology and the Modern Critique of Historicism," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 44 (9), 2018.

45 Matthew Arnold, *Literature & Dogma: An Essay Towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 55-56.

understanding."<sup>46</sup> The messianic idea of the "great and notable day of the Eternal," that is, the coming of the messiah, is the hope and anticipation of something that is coming beyond what is actually known.<sup>47</sup> Further, Arnold argues that this belief is a kind of fairy tale, an *Aberglaube*—or extra-belief—which is beyond certainty and verifiability.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, from Goethe, *Aberglaube* is the poetry of life, and it has the rights of poetry. This messianic hope and anticipation helped bring emotions into alignment with conduct, morality, and experience, giving human life the scope, depth, and progress which it otherwise would not have had.

Arnold also notes an inversion of sorts in the transition from the prophetic stance of the Old Testament writers to those of the New Testament. To wit, the Old Testament writers understood the Messiah but did not know him, while the New Testament writers knew the Messiah but did not understand him. The ancient Hebrews apprehended their god as the Eternal who secured righteousness, with an emphasis on the externalities of the world, specifically directly observable behavior. The prophecies held an intuition that a human embodiment of the Eternal was needed to move to internality, to the merging of an appropriate emotional stance with conduct. This is the internalization of the Word or the "good news" (gospel), hence centuries later Jesus Christ became the ready embodiment of this otherwise disembodied Eternal. It is worth noting that the phrase "good word" is found throughout the Old Testament, acting as a placeholder for the totality of the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>49</sup> In Genesis 12, God commanded Abraham—then named Abram—to leave Haran to find a new land (Canaan) which God would show him.<sup>50</sup> Augustine summarizes the various promises God made to Abraham after being

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46 Ibid., p. 57.

47 Ibid., p. 69.

48 Ibid., p. 70.

49 Matthew McAfee, "The Good Word: Its Non-Covenant and Covenant Significance in the Old Testament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (4), 2015.

50 Stephen D. Campbell, "The Surety of God's Promises: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 22," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 49 (3), 2019, 123-131.

commanded to leave Haran, including most importantly, “I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and magnify thy name; and thou shalt be blessed: and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee: and in thee all tribes of the earth shall be blessed.”<sup>51</sup>

By the time of the New Testament, Jesus is the embodied Messiah which now directs attention to “...that inward world of feelings and dispositions which Judaism had too much neglected.”<sup>52</sup> Even so, the New Testament writers imported their own rational and intellectual elements into their witnessing and reporting on the Messiah, leading to errors associated with *Aberglaube* (extra-belief). These observers were aspirational in assigning to Jesus and Christianity specific attributes including inwardness, mildness, and self-renouncement. Arnold stated, “There is no pleasure in proving that the Apostles sometimes made mistakes,” and went on to summarize both the accurate and inaccurate reports of St. Peter, St. Paul, St. James, and St. John (the author of the Fourth Gospel) among others.<sup>53</sup>

Being a largely aspirational project, these and other writers used Jesus as a vessel into which they dumped whatever cultural, social, and historical elements were needed to secure a religion of the heart. James’ Epistle to the Hebrews proclaims erroneously that the God of the universe is a person, and that “Jesus is the Logos of Jewish-Alexandrian philosophy.”<sup>54</sup> The biblical narratives of the New Testament are caught in something of a no man’s land—indeed, very close in essence to Agamben’s exception or limit event—which travels more along the lines of fantasy and fiction rather than an actual account of the historical Jesus.<sup>55</sup>

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51 Augustine, *City of God*, translated by M. Dods (Overland Park, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2017), 453.

52 Matthew Arnold, *Literature & Dogma*, p. 77.

53 Ibid., p. 229.

54 Ibid., 245.

55 See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, translated by K. Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence*. Ithaca, (NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Stephen Prickett, “The Status of Biblical Narrative,” *Pacifica* 2 (1), 1989, 26-46.

Arnold embodies a strained relation between belief and certainty, articulating the split between fact and truth which emerged since early Christianity and which is reflected in Vico's earlier skepticism toward the solipsistic rationalism of the Cartesian knowing subject, even while he (Vico) applied that same rationalism to a "true" explanation of human history through application of his *verum-factum* analytical framework. Arnold admired Vico's work, noting that from the 16<sup>th</sup> century forward, Italian universities had done an admirable job producing a string of prominent thinkers in medicine, law, and the physical sciences—including Galileo, Torricelli, Galvani, and Volta—but had fallen behind the world community in the arena of arts and letters with the exception of Vico, whom Arnold describes as "the only truly great name" emerging from Italian philosophy during this period.<sup>56</sup>

As a political liberal during the Victorian Era, Arnold had harsh words for dogmatists who stuck to an unreconstructed view of biblical truths rather than the empirical evidence in plain view before them. Arnold felt that creative literary works such as poetry could get at eternal truths much in the same way that scientists claim to retrieve them through the dispassionate application of scientific method.<sup>57</sup> Even so, Arnold believed that unquestioned belief systems—including and, most importantly, religious dogma—were inimical to the spirit of rationalism and empiricism arising since the Enlightenment. That is to say, from Arnold's perspective, men of faith, although not automatically condemnable, were viewed suspiciously if they allowed their beliefs to color their observations about the current state of worldly affairs. Arnold was especially critical of the movements of Tractarianism and Ritualism associated with

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56 Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold, vol. IV, Schools and Universities on the Continent*, edited by R.H. Super (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1964). Here, Arnold is exaggerating the relative lack of impact of Italian literature on the world stage. For a summary of Italian contributions to literature since the thirteenth century, see Peter Brand and Lino Pertile (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

57 Kevin McLaughlin, "Culture and Messianism: Disinterestedness in Arnold," *Victorian Studies* 50 (4), 2008, 615-639.

the work of fellow Victorian Era poet, writer, and religious leader John Henry Cardinal Newman. Although admiring the erudition and scope of Newman's writings, Arnold said of him "One is reminded of Cardinal Newman's antipathy to 'Liberalism'," and that Newman and others of orthodox (read "conservative") religious conviction "...have nothing but the old, sterile, impossible assumption of their 'infallible Church', at which a plain man can only shake his head and say with Shakespeare, 'There is no such thing!'"<sup>58</sup> In turn, in his writings on the development of Christian doctrine, Newman<sup>59</sup> sneered at the continuing growth of rationalism and utilitarianism since the Enlightenment and especially as embodied in Bentham and Mill because of the way private or individual actions and judgments were triumphant over the highest duties and the universal truths of God's word.<sup>60</sup> The latter were the things that brought men out of the caves (*vis-à-vis* Vico) and into civilization, and without divine wisdom (providence) human society would revert back to an aimless struggle for physical survival along with the other animals.

### Theology and Deconstruction

For Agamben, the launching limit event is the witnessing of St. Paul—the most prominent among the New Testament apostles—in the company of Jesus Christ. As Agamben explains,

The coming of the Messiah means that all things, even the subjects who contemplate it, are caught up in the *as not*, called and revoked at one and the same time. No subject could watch it or act *as if* at a given point. The messianic vocation dislocates and, above all, nullifies the entire subject.<sup>61</sup>

58 Matthew Arnold, *Essays, Letters, and Reviews by Matthew Arnold*, edited by F. Neiman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 218.

59 John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1900).

60 See Russell Kirk, "The Conservative Mind of Newman," *Sewanee Review* 60 (4), 1952, 659-676.

61 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, translated by P. Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005b), 41.



Agamben follows this immediately with a quote from Galatians 2:20: "It is no longer I that live [zō oukēti egō], but the Messiah living in me."<sup>62</sup> This is Benjamin's "state of exception," the beginning of Messianic time which gave rise—by way of the thesis of political theology<sup>63</sup>—to secular and public law and its summary judgment (e.g., guilty/not guilty) which corresponds with the biblical Day of Judgment.<sup>64</sup> The limit event is a gray zone where the dialectic is suspended and where, potentially, understanding and mutual recognition stop.<sup>65</sup> Agamben<sup>66</sup> goes so far as to uncover evidence of Benjamin's use of messianic time in the spacing of the word *schwache* used in the second thesis of *Handexemplar* of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, which alludes to the weakness of messianic power which is paradoxically its strength.<sup>67</sup> This is high-level deconstruction.

The zone of indeterminacy, with its temporary suspension of history, can bring either beauty or horrors depending on the configuration of the life projects, traditions, and histories found within any particular assemblage of humanity. For Agamben, the camp is the premier horror of modernity, represented in the death camp of Auschwitz where victims of the Nazi carnage live in a mere state of vegetative existence—bare life—before starvation and abuse usher them to their deaths.<sup>68</sup> The zone of indecision or indifference—whether described as the threshold, lacuna,

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62 Ibid., p. 41.

63 See Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*.

64 Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, translated by D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999a), 160-161.

65 Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, vol. 1, 1913-1926*, edited by M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

66 Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, pp. 138-145.

67 Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, pt. 2, edited by R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, translated by H. Zohn (1974-1989) as "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

68 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, translated by D. Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999b).

blind space, or hyphen<sup>69</sup>—can also be understood as the impenetrability of artistic forms such as painting and poetry, but also of the mysteries that attend to religion, taboos, and other “unspeakables.”<sup>70</sup> This enters the space of deconstruction paved by Derrida<sup>71</sup> most directly, as his entire grammatology is devoted to deciphering the traces, potentialities, and articulations of those human conditions associated with speech and artistic expression as opposed to the mere struggle for survival (once again, Agamben’s bare life).<sup>72</sup> For both Derrida and Agamben—and to a much lesser extent Vico—the theological hovers over everything they do to the extent that religion is a distinctly human creation (or endeavor), and whether within deconstruction proper (Derrida) or at its threshold (Agamben), one of the central projects of philosophy and the learned sciences is the history of how sense is made of life, death, and everything in between.

This is not to say that life and death are only or uniquely topics that can be brought into relief in new ways through linguistic analysis, grammatology, poststructuralism, hermeneutics, semiotics, semiology, or oth-

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69 See Jean-François Lyotard and Eberhard Gruber, *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999) and Susanne Valerrie, *Actors and the Art of Performance*, translated by L. Radosh and A. Lagaay (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

70 See Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, translated by D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999c) and Giorgio Agamben and Monica Ferrando, *The Unspeakable Girl*, translated by L. de la Durantaye and A.J. Wyman (London: Seagull Books, 2014).

71 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by G. Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

72 Agamben’s work exists beyond the threshold of deconstruction, in the liminal space akin to the event horizon in the region of a black hole where no escape is possible. See Kevin Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015). This does indeed capture some of the peculiarities of Agamben’s elliptical style of writing and argumentation. His prose are more like poetry than anything else, and this form must be taken into account in order to arrive at the syntactical aspects. See Adam Kotsko and Carlo Salzani, “Introduction: Agamben as a Reader,” in *Agamben’s Philosophical Lineage*, edited by A. Kotsko and C. Salzani (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 1-12.

er related endeavors represented by Derrida and Agamben. Apropos to this, sociologist Talcott Parsons spent the last two decades of his life attempting to understand religion, life, and death within the context of his functionalist and social systems analytical framework. Utilizing Marcel Mauss's paradigm of the gift, Parsons argues that in the Christian worldview the life of the individual is a gift from God, and this gift of life encompasses a threefold sacrifice: Mary giving birth to Jesus; God giving his only begotten Son for the redemption of man; and Jesus through his crucifixion giving his blood for true believers who will enter the kingdom of Heaven upon their own deaths to receive eternal life. The three principle obligations, then, are the gift of life, to live in the faith, and to die in the faith.<sup>73</sup>

Derrida turns this on its head, talking not of the gift of life, but of the gift of death.<sup>74</sup> However, this deconstructionist turn is not as radical or frame-breaking as it may first appear, for death gives the greatest gift—the gift of eternal life—at least for those chosen by God to be among the elect. This gift, which resonates throughout the ages into eternity, leaves behind the rather prosaic, lesser gift of life into which persons are thrust and through which they toil until their earthly existence is completed.

For Agamben, although the Camp is the preeminent limit event of modernity, the initial, profound, and commanding limit event within messianic time is the trial of Jesus Christ and throws into bold relief the tension between empirical or worldly facts, on the one hand, and eternal or universal truths emanating from the word of God, on the other. This represents the continual and continuing tug-of-war between faith and reason, a tension which has not been resolved in modernity with secularization ushering in scientific discourse as the new foundationalism which presumably dislodged religion as the foundational discourse of

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73 Talcott Parsons, *Action Theory and the Human Condition* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 335.

74 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, translated by D. Wills (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

premodernity.<sup>75</sup> Yet even so, today modernity's seemingly secure foundations have been rattled by a new hyperskepticism traveling under various "post" discourses including the postmodern, the postindustrial, the postsecular, the poststate, the postsocial, and even the posthuman.<sup>76</sup>

By the time Jesus came before Pontius Pilate he had already gone through a formal trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin on such charges as breaking the Sabbath, sorcery, and threatening to destroy the Jewish Temple.<sup>77</sup> In the account from Mark's Gospel, when Jesus is handed over to Pilate and made aware of the charges against him (including blasphemy and sedition), Pilate is amazed that, at least initially, at the beginning of an examination lasting some five hours, Jesus refuses to speak in his own defense.<sup>78</sup> Even so, Pilate, who was appointed praefectus of Judea by the Emperor Tiberius in A.D. 26, was also saddled with lack of firm guidelines on how to proceed with a prisoner (Jesus Christ) who had been delivered to him by Jewish authorities on the charge of sedition.<sup>79</sup> Mark's interpretation of the trial makes it appear that Pilate doubted the charge against him and, in effect, the great animating factor in the trial of Jesus Christ was envy among the Jewish authorities.<sup>80</sup> There was, as well, a seeming acquiescence to mob rule, as Pilate and the Jewish authorities were aware of an upwelling of sentiment among the Jewish people that Jesus was a sinful heathen for proclaiming that he was the son of God.

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75 Randal D. Rauser, *Theology in Search of Foundations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

76 See Rick Phillips, "The Prospects of Postsecular Religion: A Sociological Perspective," *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 4 (2), 2020, 55-79 and Simon Susan, *The Postmodern 'Turn' in the Social Sciences* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

77 John Granger Cook, "Crucifixion and Burial," *New Testament Studies* 57 (2), 2011, 193-213.

78 Helen K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 104-116.

79 S.G.F. Brandon, *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968).

80 Anselm C. Hagedorn and Jerome H. Neyrey, "'It Was Out of Envy that They Handed Jesus Over' (Mark 15.10): The Anatomy of Envy and the Gospel of Mark," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69, 1998, 15-56.

Agamben's rendition of the trial of Jesus Christ draws more from the Gospel of John than from the Synoptic Gospels including that of Mark.<sup>81</sup> Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?", to which, finally, Jesus replied with another question, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate then asked, "What have you done?", to which Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not from this world."<sup>82</sup> Pilate follows up with "So you are a king?," and Jesus' reply moves the discussion from the kingdom to the truth: "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is from the truth listens to my voice."<sup>83</sup>

### Immanence and Transcendence

Pilate then asks the question that has reverberated throughout the ages: "What is truth?" Agamben shifts to the Gospel of Nicodemus to continue the record of this interrogation, where Jesus replied, "Truth is from heaven." Pilate, incredulous, retorted "Is there not truth upon earth?" In this back and forth between Pilate and Jesus, Jesus is clearly making a distinction between worldly facts and universal or eternal truths, arguing that truth is represented in the latter.<sup>84</sup> After having Jesus flogged and directing soldiers to weave a crown of thorns about his head, an increasingly exasperated Pilate asked Jesus again, "Where are you from?" Jesus reiterate that he is not from this world, but Pilate heard from the throng assembled there warning against releasing him, asking them "Shall I crucify your King?" Upon which the chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." Pilate then handed Jesus over to them to be crucified.<sup>85</sup> The limit event ends with the judge, Pontius Pilate, refusing to render a verdict, signifying an empty space akin to Lyotard's hyphen or the suspension of the dialectic.

81 Brandon, *The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 125.

82 Giorgio Agamben, *Pilate and Jesus*, translated by A. Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 17.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

A legal tribunal is set up to examine whatever empirical evidence is pertinent to the dispute at hand, and to render a judgment (guilty or not guilty) by triers of fact (whether jury or judge). In this interrogation, Jesus made a number of claims that could not be made sense of within the realm of juridical/empirical reasoning. The claims “I am the son of God” along with “my kingdom is not of this world” throw standard “who” and “what” interrogatives into disarray, opening up a transempirical or metaphysical set of universal truths which, bounded up as they are in a cohesive dogma of unmovable belief, must triumph over the set of facts that a particular group of humans use to organize their understandings about their world and lives in the here and now. These “facts” are only good for the time being and as applied to the particular forms of life emerging locally within the shared activities constituting a culture, history, and tradition. Even so, those who operate on the basis of worldly facts and who may not share the set of ultimate values of one being tried in such a worldly court touting juridical truth, would have the power to deal with the blasphemer in a number of ways specified by the procedural rules (whether norms, laws, or other sign system) already in place.

Controversies over the conflict between eternal truths and worldly facts, although originating within the theological realm, also show up in the secular realm. Indeed, much of the discussion about postmodernism is at least connected with the idea that along with all the other emergent posts- threatening modernity, one that should be paid particularly close attention to is postsecularism. All of these posts- do the work of alerting readers that immanence (the empirical or physical) is not the last word, and that even perhaps transcendence (the metaphysical) is more consequential for life and explanation than immanence. For example, a mundane, dustbowl empiricist stance toward sex or gender will back up its assertion that there are indeed only two genders—male and female, which are required for procreation thereby fulfilling the function of maintaining the species over time—with methods available from the biological sciences, for example, genetic testing which demonstrates whether or not any particular person is an XX (female) or XY (male).

These are worldly facts which seem indisputable. Yet, there has been a growing movement suggesting that utilizing such genetic tests and making proclamations attesting to the veracity of the gender binary—such as, for example, the up until recently unquestioned practice of the Olympics to genetically test athletes to determine whether they can legally participate in either men’s or women’s competitions—amount to “transphobia” and that reality exists among a continuum or a spectrum rather than the handy but flawed dichotomous thinking which characterized the rise of modernity.<sup>86</sup> But the interesting thing of invoking the triumph of the trans- or the transempirical is that it raises the same questions over the status of faith versus fact that Pilate raised when he asked Jesus “What is truth?” It seems that in some instances—and now a growing number of instances—truth is equivalent to unshakeable faith or belief, one so powerful and consequential that holders of these eternal truths are willing to go to their deaths rather than renounce their beliefs (giving rise to the phenomenon of martyrdom). Jesus’ statement “I am not of this world,” then, may be viewed as being on the same plane as “Men menstruate” or “Identity triumphs over biology.” They are both assertions that cannot be verified, much less made of sense, by the methods of the empirical sciences.

Influenced largely by Benjamin,<sup>87</sup> Agamben ventures into Kabbalistic mysticism to grapple with the imponderabilities of such interrogatives as “who” and “why,” drawing largely from the Zoharic notion of different levels of meaning and interpretation.<sup>88</sup> Four such levels are the literal, the Aggadic, the allegorical, and the *mysterium theophilosophical*.<sup>89</sup> This latter level comprises the “mystery of faith,” which was the

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86 For a recent example of this argument, see <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/stop-using-phony-science-to-justify-transphobia/>.

87 See Gary Smith, “‘Die Zauberrjuden’: Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and other German-Jewish Esoterics between the World Wars,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 4 (2), 1995.

88 Giorgio Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, translated by M. Sullivan and S. Whitsitt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

89 Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, translated by R. Man-

stumbling block in the confrontation between Pilate and Jesus. Early Kabbalists taught that before the world was created only God and His Name existed (the tetragrammaton YHWH), hence the name was also the embodiment of the divine power of Yahweh. To reiterate, naming—in the everyday empirical realm, the ready ability to distinguish persons on the basis of answering the question of “Who?”—is the mystical unity such that “Thy Name is in Thee and in Thee is Thy Name.”<sup>90</sup> Within modernity and its movement toward secularization, the original mystery of faith has been replaced with the mystery of literature—the theological version of this being, of course, the mystery of liturgy<sup>91</sup>—and extended into postmodernity with ambiguous results.<sup>92</sup> In postmodernity, with the rejection of grand metanarratives (of both religion and science), the mystery of literature is extended within, for example, deconstructionism, whereby the world is like a text insofar as persons are variably situated with regard to their psychological and cognitive endowment, socialization experiences, sociodemographic characteristics, and identities.<sup>93</sup> This means that the physical, cultural, and social aspects of the world are open to varying interpretations whereby meaning is endlessly deferred.<sup>94</sup> As a result, the project of establishing truth, beauty, and goodness on sturdy foundations grinds to a halt, much like the suspension of the dialectic or the empty spaces of the limit event. But also, with the emergence of post-secularism—along with the many other “posts” as discussed above—the inflation of the both the image and symbol (for example, Baudrillard’s

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heim (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 53.

90 Ibid., p. 44.

91 Giorgio Agamben, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, translated by A. Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013a).

92 Giorgio Agamben, *The Fire and the Tale*, translated by L. Chiesa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017b).

93 Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited by J.D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997).

94 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).



simulacra) creates a space for theology, religion, scripture, and sacrament to make a grand return to the world stage.<sup>95</sup>

In the book of Genesis Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebecca and grandson of Abraham, wrestles a man or angel—his identity is ambiguous—a contest which continues throughout the night. Jacob eventually prevails and suffers a dislocated hip. In Genesis 35:10, God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.”<sup>96</sup> The ambiguity of the opponent and the renaming of Jacob—now to be called Israel—throws into question the truth in which a just man presumably dwells. Referring to the Zohar for guidance, Agamben notes that “*Who?* is the highest limit of heaven: *What?* is the lowest. Jacob inherits them both: he flees from one limit to the other, from the initial limit of *Who?* to the final limit of *What?*, and he holds himself in the middle.”<sup>97</sup>

Augustine rejects ambiguity, arguing that Jacob wrestled with an angel and that the injury he received resulted from contact with that angel, and that Jacob’s lameness was at the same time a blessing. The blessing is for those who believe in Christ, while lameness is for the unbelievers. Augustine goes on to note that Jacob was renamed because Israel means “seeing God,” the reward of all the saints.<sup>98</sup> With regard to the everyday lifeworld of embodied subjectivity, naming is part of the process of fixing identities in an uncertain and precarious world. These cultural practices deliver some modicum of empirical validity for understanding ourselves and others. These things that involve human activity and impart meaning are aspects of a taken-for-granted empirical realm of facts, and for the most part are not subject to second guessing or handwringing. On the other hand, claims and activities that cannot be made sense of within the

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95 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by S.F. Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

96 Steven Molen, “The Identity of Jacob’s Opponent: Wrestling with Ambiguity in Gen. 32:22-32,” *Shofar* 11 (2), 1993, 25.

97 Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, p. 57.

98 Augustine, *City of God*, p. 471.

context of grounding in an objective, everyday, taken-for-granted world, and which produce skepticism or even open hostility toward persons who are involved in such provocative or frame-breaking claims-making, may defend their positions as being not of this world or subject to assessment by a higher-order system of meaning. That is to say, there is the possibility of invoking higher-order truths—described as eternal, universal, or even providential—which trump the evidence available within the empirical realm. These metaphysical claims, although often associated with the spiritual or divine, can also be applied to secular phenomena. To reiterate, the claim that “I am the son of God” or “I am not of this world” may be no less fantastic or beyond belief than the claim that “men menstruate.”

### Life and Death

Life is precarious and always ends in death, of course, but a death can be either good or bad depending on the circumstances, such as the “good death” of the terminally ill at home surrounded by family members who help maintain dignity and tranquility for the dying up to the very end.<sup>99</sup> Good deaths can also be attributed to kings, martyrs, or fighters who die honorably facing their impending doom on the battlefield or elsewhere. When King Charles I was executed in 1649, he faced his executioner and asked, “Is my hair well?” and instructed the executioner to deliver the death blow upon his hand gesture, to which the executioners politely replied, “Yes I will and it please your Majesty.” As Donald Siebert explains, “It was expected that good people would die well, and that the good *and* great would die greatly.”<sup>100</sup> Conversely on October 27, 2019, when news broke that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had been killed in a United

99 Laura Cottrell and Wendy Duggleby, “The ‘Good Death’: An Integrative Literature Review,” *Palliative and Supportive Care* 14 (6), 2016, 686-712.

100 Donald T. Siebert, “The Aesthetic Execution of Charles I: Clarendon to Hume,” in *Executions and the British Experience from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: A Collection of Essays*, edited by W.B. Thesing (pp. 7-27) (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co, 1990), 8. See also James J. Chriss, *Social Control: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 110-111.

States military operation carried out in northwest Syria, President Donald Trump explained that Baghdadi had died “whimpering, screaming, and crying,” gleefully emphasizing the fact that this was a bad death.<sup>101</sup>

This is of course symbolic payback for the atrocities ISIS had been carrying out under the direction of Baghdadi, including televised spectacles of beheadings and burning people alive. This is substantiated in Agamben’s discussion of the human potential for both light and darkness, where he states, “The greatness—and also the abyss—of human potentiality is that it is first of all a potential not to act, *potential for darkness*.”<sup>102</sup> Humans have not only the faculty for speech and vision but also, following Hegel, the faculty of death.<sup>103</sup> Agamben dedicated an entire early book to the issue of the connection between the faculties of language and death.<sup>104</sup> Not only does he note Hegel’s prominence in this area, but also Heidegger, who argued that

Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either. The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought. It can, however, beckon us toward the way in which the nature of language draws us into its concern, and so relates us to itself, in case death belongs with what reaches out for us, touches us.<sup>105</sup>

But returning to Hegel for more on animal voice, which Heidegger seems to have ruled out as a possibility, Agamben is intrigued by Hegel’s claim that animals find their voice in violent death, which in essence

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101 For a summary of this event, see the *Washington Post* report at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/whimpering-screaming-and-crying-a-beautiful-dog-trumps-bombastic-account-of-the-baghdadi-raid/2019/10/27/c50c3444-f8cc-11e9-9534-e0dbcc9f5683\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/whimpering-screaming-and-crying-a-beautiful-dog-trumps-bombastic-account-of-the-baghdadi-raid/2019/10/27/c50c3444-f8cc-11e9-9534-e0dbcc9f5683_story.html).

102 Agamben, *Potentialities*, p 181.

103 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

104 Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, translated by K.E. Pinkus with M. Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

105 Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, translated by P.D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 107-108.

is the articulation of a removed self, or a negativity.<sup>106</sup> We could note, for example, that the two basic voicings animals make are mating calls and warnings, with of course the latter encompassing voicings during an attack which could lead to injury or death. Mating calls lead to procreation, that is, to life and positivity, while warning and attack calls lead to death and negativity.

The connection between language and voice was later put into context in Agamben's discussion of Aristotle's *On Interpretation* in which he stated that the voice is "the sound produced by a creature possessing a soul."<sup>107</sup> And further still, in modifications of this original formulation in his later writings, Aristotle moved to the position that beyond affectations of the soul, what gives the voice signification, that is, its semantic character, are letters, which Agamben interprets as the first and ultimate hermeneut, namely, the γράμμα (*gramma*).<sup>108</sup> If language is explained as a process of interpretation, this process has three elements: the (1) voice interprets and signifies the (2) mental experience which in turn corresponds to the (3) things (*pragmata*) in the world being signified by vocalizations.<sup>109</sup> The letters (*grammata*), namely, the elements of the words used in vocal signification of the simultaneity of things in the world and mental images of those things, as the first and last hermeneut, is both a sign and an element of the voice. This, Agamben points out, illustrates the paradoxical status of the *gramma* in that it is an index of itself.<sup>110</sup> Just like in many other areas of his thought, Agamben arrives at a limit point, at the arrival of the exhaustion of signification representing an empty spot or zone of indifference. This is the most consistent feature of his work, and in this sense his project veers off from the self-assuredness of explanation which Vico is pursuing and developing within the horizon of his ideal eternal history.

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106 Agamben, *Language and Death*, p. 45.

107 Giorgio Agamben, *What is Philosophy?*, translated by L. Chiesa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018a), 16.

108 Ibid., p. 18.

109 Agamben, *Language and Death*, p. 38.

110 Ibid., p. 39.

Liotard and Gruber (1999) have also seen this connection between voice and death as well, but rather than noting the empty space regarding animal voice, he sticks with the more traditional examination of the potential for both binding and freedom in the call of the Almighty.<sup>111</sup> Here, Lyotard and Gruber cite Paul from Romans, who argued that freedom comes from listening to the voice of God, and that “One is emancipated from death only by accepting to be ‘enslaved to God,’” thereby gaining the advantage of sanctification.<sup>112</sup> Hence, “the end is eternal life.” The threshold is the hyphen, in particular, the hyphenation “Judeo-Christian,” which represents the old covenant (of Abraham and later Moses) and the new covenant of Jesus. The Old Testament covenant was symbolized most prominently by the word or letter (e.g., Mosaic law), while the New Testament utilized the voice, represented most prominently by faith in God. Lyotard and Gruber lament the empty space of the hyphen (which they attribute most directly to Paul), for in the move from the Judeo to the Christian the former is relegated to the background while the latter is exalted. Lyotard and Gruber state, “The truth of the Jew is in the Christian. Left to the letter, to his letter, the Jew is simply dead. Christian breath reanimates the letter, brings it back to life, gives it back its soul. ...What is Jewish must be forgotten.”<sup>113</sup>

The walking mummies living in a nether land between life and death at Auschwitz is a testament to the atrocities of which man is capable. These limit events give us a glimpse of what it means to be human (as opposed to, say, mere animal existence), even as atrocities expose us to the potential inhumanities of the human condition.<sup>114</sup> This means that biopolitics (power over life) must incorporate as well a thanatopolitics (power over death), and because of this theology inexorably enters into the cognitive spaces of social theory.<sup>115</sup> Along the way there is the production of a

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111 Lyotard and Gruber, *The Hyphen*.

112 Ibid., p. 8.

113 Ibid., p. 15.

114 Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

115 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford, UK:

postsecularism that must be reconciled alongside other post-movements of thought including postmodernism, posthumanism, poststructuralism, postindustrialism, and of course the “postlife” of religion’s grand soteriological promise, life after death or eternal life.<sup>116</sup>

### Political Theology and Providence

Agamben’s view of messianic time and the continuing relevance of divine providence even throughout a so-called secularizing age of Enlightenment, is consistent with that of Vico.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, following the idea of political theology, Agamben views modern government as a “providential machine” which in modernity and beyond secularizes the guiding principles of a beneficent god.<sup>118</sup> Both Vico and Agamben reject ancient Greek historian Polybius’ idea that, “...were there philosophers on earth, religions would be unnecessary.”<sup>119</sup> Although Polybius did indeed produce an early rationalistic, cyclical theory of history — the form of which is similar to Vico’s own *corsi-ricorsi* theory of culture and history — Polybius lost sight of providence, leading him to believe in the “...possibility of a nation in the world, which, while it contained sages, lacked any civil reli-

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Basil Blackwell, 1990).

116 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, translated by A. Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013a); Giorgio Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days*, translated by A. Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017a); Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, translated by Adam Kotsko (London: Seagull Books, 2020); Miguel Vatter, “Thanatopolitics, Biopower, and Contemplative Life,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 10 (3), 2011, 217-250.

117 Providence (*providenzia* in Italian, *πρόνοια* in Greek), although seldom appearing in either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, means “divine foresight” whereby humanity is endowed by the creator to do that which is good guided by divine purpose, provision, and rule. See David Fergusson, “The Theology of Providence,” *Theology Today* 67, 2015, 262.

118 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, translated by L. Chiesa (with M. Mandarini) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011b), 109-139.

119 Vico, *Selected Writings*, p. 171.

gion."<sup>120</sup> Machiavelli subscribed to Polybius' idea, allowing him to strip political will from its moral bearings fixed by the guiding ethos of divine providence, and by the time of Hobbes modern political theorists could not even imagine a continuity between early, brutish humans whose fables and hero myths were grounded not in notions of the divine, but instead in power, cunning, and survival of the fittest.<sup>121</sup> Greek biographer and essayist Plutarch argued that the goddess Fortuna was responsible for the rise of the Roman Empire, hence, the dumb luck of fortune often triumphs over the virtuous will which Machiavelli attempted to teach to his prince.<sup>122</sup> To guard against this, Machiavellianism emphasizes the instrumental and strategic manipulation of political *prudentia* and an appeal to another myth, that of *fortuna*, "...an imagined existential threat to the political order that demands a violent response."<sup>123</sup>

Fortuna was a pagan goddess who battled with Jove for supremacy in the early pantheon of Roman and Greek antiquity, and this represented the eternal battle between order and chance, between stability and calamity.<sup>124</sup> It was fitting that Fortuna was female, for with the rise of patriarchy the female temperament was always viewed as fickle, scornful, and unpredictable. Fortuna was a cruel mistress who delivered fortune or sorrow seemingly randomly, with neither rhyme nor reason, unlike the steadying hand of Jove who, as fate would have it, did not survive in the transition to a Christian worldview. But Fortuna did survive, and she showed up as the handmaiden to the Renaissance conception of fortune in the hands of Machiavelli and later Hobbes. Chance, represented by Fortuna, is the instantiation of free will which is opposed to the iron hand of a God who supervises the world of humans and who can inter-

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120 Ibid., pp. 146-147.

121 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 20-22.

122 Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli's Three Romes* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996).

123 Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 433.

124 Howard R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature* (New York: Octagon Books, 1967).

vene either directly or indirectly through the work of emissaries (such as angels, prophets, god-kings, shepherds, etc.).

Vico recognizes four faculties that have been discussed throughout the ages and occasionally interpreted as central to understanding the human condition, these being *numen* (divine will), *fatum* (fate), *casus* (outcome), and *fortuna* (fortune).<sup>125</sup> In the beginning *fortuna* was conflated with the word *fortus*, Latin for “good,” so there arose a readiness to interpret *fortuna* as “good fortune.” However, over time it became apparent that fortunes can be not only favorable but also adverse, hence the double expression *fortis fortuna* developed to signify good fortunes as opposed to bad fortunes. Upon this realization, and as passed from the antiquity of the goddess Fortuna into later times and especially with the emergence of a Christian worldview, the idea emerged that God creates only the good while fallen man (arising from the fallibility and error-proneness of humanity) has the potential to create the bad. It was upon this realization that Machiavelli and fellow travelers developed the myth of *fortuna* which, shot through as it is with unpredictability, randomness, and chaos, demands official (that is, state-sanctioned) violent responses to bad fortunes in order to restore the kingdom. Vico recognizes the mythic origins of Fortuna as goddess, stating that “...in this universe established by God, the queen of everything is fortune.”<sup>126</sup> Yet Vico, in the development of his ideal eternal history, strove to render real history as the active work of individuals rather than such fancies and illusions as fate, fortune, chance, or even divine will.<sup>127</sup> Benedetto Croce, an astute Italian commentator on Vico, explains Vico’s stance as follows:

Fate, Chance, Fortune, God—all these explanations have the same defect: they separate the individual from his product, and instead of eliminating the capricious element, the individual will in history, as they claim to do, they immensely reinforce and increase it. Blind Fate, irresponsible chance, and tyrannical God are all alike capricious.<sup>128</sup>

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125 Vico, *Selected Writings*, pp. 76-78.

126 Ibid., pp. 77-78.

127 Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, p. 86.

128 Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, translated by R.G.



Given Vico's acceptance of divine providence as the key which unlocks the mystery of the rise and fall of civilizations and man's self-interpretation across the cycle of historical eras, how could God be seen as capricious alongside fate, chance, and fortune? Here, Vico clearly makes a distinction between the early tyrannical and iron-fisted gods of antiquity represented in the Greek pantheon, who delivered order to the fearful and trembling lowly masses of humanity struggling to reach a higher stage of existence, and the later Christian god who elicits not only fear but also love and adoration from the flock of true believers. Primitive humanity is beset by childish fascination with the world, and as they are bereft of reason these early people are foolish, and "Because he lacks wisdom as his pilot, the fool surrenders himself into the hands of fortune."<sup>129</sup>

With regard to Christianity, Augustine said that all things are governed by providence, and this is Vico's worldview as well.<sup>130</sup> If all things are guided by providence, it does not make much sense to contemplate free will versus determinism, and in the age of monotheism such questions must now be posed within a unitary framework of one true god. On this point Vico seems to agree with St. Paul, from his famous speech in the Areopagus, who argued that it is God who creates the space in which human beings may find freedom, and that freedom is not intrinsic to creaturehood (that is, bare life) but a gift of the creator.<sup>131</sup> Vico, drawing largely from ancient Roman scholar Varro's massive study of the origin of the Latin language, notes that the Latin word *mens* means "mind" [*pensiero*], and even more to the point, that mind is said to be given to human beings by the gods.

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Collingwood (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002 [1913]), 115.

129 Giambattista Vico, *On Humanistic Education (Six Inaugural Orations, 1699-1707)*, translated by G.A. Pinton and A.W. Shippee (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 70.

130 Augustine, "St. Augustine (354-430)," in *Selections from Medieval Philosophers: From Augustine to Albert the Great*, edited and translated by R. McKeon (3-64) (Chicago: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 62.

131 Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 81.

Augustine draws heavily from Varro as well. For example, in his *City of God*, Augustine summarizes Varro's theory of the three grades of soul existing in universal nature.<sup>132</sup> The first is simply the life force—which appears to be the forerunner to Agamben's bare life—with no attending sense capabilities (e.g., vegetative life).<sup>133</sup> The second is life with sense perception, which requires the evolution of sense organs. The third is the highest development of life, whereby not only sense but also mind appears, and where "intelligence has its throne." The third soul is possessed by man alone. Even so, Augustine takes issue with Varro's natural theology which can lead to irrational worship, thereby recommending that he return to a more sensible civil theology.

### Vico's Eternal Cycle of History

Since men's thoughts are created and awakened by God, it is important to understand the story of humanity as an ideal eternal history. Vico's "new science" studies the nature of knowledge and ideas across the ages, whether in the guise of the Aristotelians' active intellect, the Stoics' ethereal sense, or the Socratics' demon.<sup>134</sup> Vico's eternal cycle of history describing the rise and fall and rise again of civilizations through the eras of gods, heroes, and men is described below.

The ancients needed gods to bring them out from the caves, out of superstition and animal lust, and so the Word was brought to the people and enforced with rapaciousness into the era of heroes, where a myth arose that the lowly masses yearned for leaders to lead them out of the wilderness. The age of heroes delivered the fables and tales of heroic protagonists fighting evil and deadly sins, and on their backs kingdoms were built and defended in the earlier, absolutist version of government (the kingship model). Such king-gods became heroes and also appointed themselves as such through such cultural innovations as the divine right of kings, but with the dawning of the age of enlightenment the people—

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132 Augustine. *City of God*, pp. 199-200.

133 See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

134 Vico, *Selected Writings*, p. 66.

the humble citizens of the sovereign state—started growing restless and challenged the unquestioned rule of leaders and sought to share power with them. The toppling of kings and the ushering in of democracy gives rise to the era of people (men), and as satisfaction of wants and desires are met more systematically with the rise of the service city and numerous helping professions (medicine, psychotherapy, and social work to name a few), persons lose tolerance for even the small aches and pains of life while at the same time demanding that the government protect them from the profanations of a hurdy-gurdy, dangerous world. Although launched in the antiquity of cosmological and theological speculation, this escape from the state of nature, which ushered in civilization along with the belief in a growing chasm between the animal and human, becomes a core cultural feature of modernity even as ecological movements emerge—hearkening back to the ancient Greek Cynics—which direct true believers to reject the distinctiveness of human beings in favor of a unitary theory of nature and life.<sup>135</sup>

Along with this, the self, which used to be shored up through close and personal relationships with friends and family, now becomes a focal concern of governments as well, and subjectivity is mined further and deeper to protect fragile self-esteem and punish those who would violate it. In addition, the health tag, initially applied to the body and later to the mind, is continually extended and now we can talk about public health, behavioral health, family health, pet health, immigrant health, prisoner health, adolescent health, financial health, friendship health, and the real biggie: sexual health.<sup>136</sup> With sexual health, eroticism is sought as an end for and of itself, the feeling part carved out of the functional aspect of sex, which is of course procreation. Of course, Lester Ward noted long ago that humanity slowly and inexorably circumvents and ensnares nature's

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135 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, translated by K. Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). See also James J. Chriss, *Law and Society: A Sociological Approach*. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2020), 168.

136 James J. Chriss, "Social Control: History of the Concept," in *Handbook of Social Control*, edited by M. Deflem (pp. 9-22) (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019).

method, producing an artificial human society alongside the state of nature from which humanity had continually worked to escape.<sup>137</sup>

But the focus on satisfying wants—erotic and otherwise—becomes a runaway norm, because human appetites are insatiable and without sufficient constraints in place to moderate them, the pursuit of gratifications will bring a collapse to social order and return men to the caves—to animal life (Agamben’s bare life)—once again. And then at some point, lost in the wilderness, grunts and utterances will attain the minimal level of symbolic significance made intelligible to those particular human beings in that particular setting—the early poetry of the rude races—once again giving birth (that is, rebirth) to the gods. And, so, the cycle churns on.

Soon after the era of gods comes the era of heroes, the first attempt to inject humanity into the grandiosity of the cosmos and the mysteries of life that confront primitive minds just escaping savagery and barbarism. The early epic poetry of Homer and Virgil are well-known, but we will move ahead to the late medieval period, specifically the early 15<sup>th</sup> century where an unknown (perhaps Scottish or English) author wrote the poem *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, in which the goddess Fortuna makes an appearance in a dream of Arthur’s.<sup>138</sup> As a genre of classical heroism King Arthur is invested with the power of Alexander, but Arthur’s campaign against the Roman emperor Lucius would aspire to avoid the bad fate (or the bad repetition) that befell the latter. In the dream Arthur finds himself in a forest filled with savage beasts but escapes to an earthly paradise replete with vines of silver, grapes of gold, fine fruit and colorful birds.<sup>139</sup> After this, Lady Fortune descends from the heavens on her bejeweled wheel which contains eight of the Nine Worthies. All the riders on the wheel are kings or great military leaders, among whom are Alexander, Hector, Julius Caesar, Judas Maccabeus, Joshua, David, Charlem-

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137 Lester F. Ward, *Dynamic Sociology*, two vols. (New York: Appleton, 1883).

138 Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 210.

139 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

agne, and Godfrey.<sup>140</sup> After several of them fall, Fortuna places Arthur on the wheel, giving him a scepter, diadem, and a “pome” or “orb engraved with a map of the world.”<sup>141</sup> Originally quite taken by Arthur, by midday Fortune’s mood changes and she crushes Arthur under the wheel.

After awaking, Arthur consults a trusted confidante to interpret his dream. This philosopher—in the poem, clearly playing the part of the medieval moralist—tells Arthur that his time has passed and that he should prepare for death. With the appearance of Fortuna in the dream, Arthur was not able to escape the tyranny of repetition after all: Arthur’s initial escape to paradise from the terrors of the jungle was a repetition of Alexander’s arrival at his own earthly paradise after successful military campaigns.<sup>142</sup> In that paradise Alexander was given a stone by his own philosopher—Aristotle—which has the extraordinary property of outweighing everything in the world. This wonderstone is Alexander, whose presence in the world outweighs history and time. As Patterson explains, “Alexander received an object that marked the limits of the very sovereignty it was supposed to acknowledge, just as the Earthly Paradise itself stood as an impassable limit to his geographical conquests.”<sup>143</sup> Likewise, Arthur’s demise after briefly being placed in the company of the Nine Worthies ends in darkness and tragedy, yet the saving grace here is that it is only a dream.

### Francis Bacon and Modern Science

Myth, fables, and tales of the otherworldly whether Christian, pagan, or somewhere in between, are all part of metaphysical speculation which

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140 Dorsey Armstrong, “Rewriting the Chronicle Tradition: The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Arthur’s Sword of Peace,” *Parergon* 25 (1), 2008, 95.

141 Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, p. 225.

142 The story of Alexander’s trip to paradise likely stretches as far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, in the literary record of the Babylonian Talmud. See Andrés Prieto, “Alexander and the Geographer’s Eye: Allegories of Knowledge in Martín Fernández de Enciso’s *Suma de geographía* (1519),” *Hispanic Review* 78 (2), 2010, 173.

143 Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, p. 226.

has occupied primitive and more advanced human thought since antiquity. In his own attempt to develop an ideal, eternal history, and although drawing from many sources, Vico points to four thinkers as central to the analytical synthesis that would become his new science. These four thinkers are Plato, Tacitus, Bacon, and Grotius.<sup>144</sup> The lifetimes of these four thinkers span approximately 2,000 years across four countries, from the classical philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome (Plato and Tacitus), on through the medieval period to the Renaissance and the English polymath Francis Bacon and the Dutch lawyer and theologian Hugo Grotius. Plato was indispensable for recommending that the metaphysical takes precedence over the physical, but remained “in the clouds” to the extent that universal forms could be identified which need never attend to the empirical particularities of men and their societies at any given time. Tacitus, on the other hand, although a metaphysician as well, contemplated men as they are rather than as they should be, thereby presumably avoiding the idealism of Plato.

Francis Bacon had the advantage of more than a century of intellectual development since classical antiquity. Vico explained that “Plato is the prince of Greek wisdom, and the Greeks have no Tacitus, so Romans and Greeks alike have no Bacon.”<sup>145</sup> Bacon had command of not only metaphysics and physics, but somehow seemingly incorporated ideal and eternal principles into empirical insights of the practical conditions of men as they lived and developed in the real world. Bacon read Agricola on the mechanical arts, was trained in law, and studied alchemy, magic, and other mysteries of the world, all of which he did not leave to simple speculation but attempted to bring into a conceptual unity.<sup>146</sup> Bacon spent the last few years of his life compiling encyclopedic summaries of such topics as nature and the arts, a primal history of all known histo-

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144 Giambattista Vico, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, translated by M.H. Fisch and T.G. Bergin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1944), 138.

145 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

146 Paolo Rossi, *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science*, translated by S. Rabinovitch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

ries (published posthumously as *Forest of Forests*), the history of wind, and the history of life and death itself.<sup>147</sup> All this was to culminate in a New Science, and of course Vico's own *New Science* was modeled after Bacon's lifework. Bacon speculated about the existence of the lost city of Atlantis—Bacon's *New Atlantis* envisioned the rise of science out of the remnants of magic, theology, and Kabbalist mysticism—and there is further speculation that Bacon may have been the author of Shakespeare's works.<sup>148</sup> Bacon was often a hidden or shadow figure, as much of his writings were under pseudonyms or otherwise unattributed. Considering all this, Dawkins argues that "Bacon patterned himself on King Solomon, in the sense that the latter was renowned for building the great temple at Jerusalem, known as Solomon's Temple, for forming a Masonic fraternity to design and construct it, for writing a book of wisdom and a book of natural history, and for being a master of Cabala."<sup>149</sup>

Even with all this attention to mysticism and mystery, Bacon's new science was the *a posteriori* of inductive method rather than the deductive *a priori* of the Greek syllogism. Here, Bacon stands with Galileo.<sup>150</sup> As Bacon explains,

The syllogism consists of propositions, propositions consists of words, words are symbols of notions. Therefore, if the notions themselves (which is the root of the matter) are confused and over-hastily abstracted from the facts, there can be no firmness in the superstructure. Our only hope therefore lies in a true induction.<sup>151</sup>

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147 Ibid., p. 11.

148 See Mark Finnan, "The Oak Island Mystery, Sir Francis Bacon and the New World," in *The View Beyond: Sir Francis Bacon: Alchemy, Science, Mystery*, edited by D. Patrick (London: Polair Publishing, 2011), 177-192 and J.H. Kern, "Shakespeare's Epitaphs and Francis Bacon," *Neophilologus* 13 (1), 1928, 107-117.

149 Peter Dawkins, "The Great Instauration," in *The View Beyond: Sir Francis Bacon: Alchemy, Science, Mystery*, edited by D. Patrick (19-31) (London: Polair Publishing, 2011), 21.

150 Peter Milward, "Christendom Versus Empire," *Heythrop Journal* 58 (3), 2017, 403.

151 Quoted in Stuart Hampshire, *The Age of Reason: The Seventeenth Century Philosophers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 25.

Agamben has dealt with Bacon sporadically and only in passing, such as in his *Infancy and History* wherein he notes that the expropriation of experience by philosophers seeking to secure the advantages to science to which Baconian inductionism was based, was the founding project of modernity.<sup>152</sup> Agamben further notes that Bacon did not view experience as an unqualified good for the securing of science—such as in his skepticism of some fables and myths (e.g., King Arthur) as guides to real phenomena to which they refer. This hedging of bets on an unbridled embrace of experience brings to the fore another huge project of modernity, that of securing understanding of the senses and how they work in the claimmaking of experience.<sup>153</sup> It should also be admitted that Bacon did very little in the way of the inductive sciences he espoused, with one known exception. On a chilly March day Bacon stuffed a chicken with snow to see if it could be preserved, and it ended up costing him his life: He died a few days later from bronchitis or pneumonia.<sup>154</sup>

And what about the King Arthur myth discussed above? Surely an Englishman as broadly learned as Francis Bacon must have had something to say about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, “the primary myth of Britain.”<sup>155</sup> For the most part, Bacon was dismissive of King Arthur, even while acknowledging—as Vico does later—that magic, myths and legends may indeed have superseded fantastic accounts of the origins of nations. In many instances, though, such myths and fantasies of antiquity stand more as “superstitious conceits” or “frivolous experiments” which do little to advance the labors of science and history.<sup>156</sup>

152 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, p. 17.

153 Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 88.

154 Dan Falk, *The Science of Shakespeare: A New Look at the Playwright’s Universe* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2014), 101. See also Elizabeth Gruber, *Renaissance Ecopolitics from Shakespeare to Bacon: Rethinking Cosmopolis* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

155 Peter Dawkins (n.d.), “The British Landscape Zodiac.” From the Francis Bacon Research Trust, located at [https://www.fbrt.org.uk/pages/essays/The\\_British\\_Landscape\\_Zodiac.pdf](https://www.fbrt.org.uk/pages/essays/The_British_Landscape_Zodiac.pdf).

156 B.H.G. Wormald, *Francis Bacon: History, Politics and Science, 1561-1626* (Cam-



Even with the renunciation, Bacon has at least one known, seemingly positive, connection to the Arthur legend. Thomas Hughes wrote a play titled *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, and as late as 1588 it was performed for the Queen. Bacon is listed in the program as a writer of one of the dumb-shows—a pantomime skit used to foretell key scenes of the play—and although Arthur is the protagonist, things do not end well for him. Indeed, in the play Arthur commits incest with his sister and is killed by their illegitimate son, Mordred.<sup>157</sup> So even here, Bacon's intellectual activities are directed at the soiling of the legacy of Britain's great myth.

### Conclusion: Milbank's Theological Reading of Vico

I want to close with a reflection on John Milbank's early writings on Vico, especially with regard to Vico's later works such as *Diritto Universale* and later versions of the *Scienza Nuova*.<sup>158</sup> If one so chooses, these reflections could also be coordinated with the immense erudition of Isaiah Berlin's extended treatment of Vico.<sup>159</sup> Milbank rejects rationalistic explanations (such as those of Comte and Spencer) of an evolutionary upgrading of human thought from a primitive, speculative state to a more enlightened, rational state with the ushering in of positivism, empiricism, and science. Instead, Milbank favors Vico and others who acknowledge that the cycle of history always contains the contemplation of divinity at its core even as it is presumably superseded by rational and empirical systems of thought which declare the death of God in the inexorable march

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bridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 58.

157 John Gassner, "Tudor Tragedy," in *Medieval and Tudor Drama*, edited by J. Gassner (403-405) (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 1987), 404.

158 Milbank's reflections on Vico stretch across two volumes published in 1991 and 1992. See John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico, 1668-1744: Part 1, The Early Metaphysics* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991) and John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico, 1668-1744: Part 2, Language, Law and History* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992). Here I will be dealing primarily with the second volume.

159 See Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*.

of secularization. But the eternal cycle never obliterates the theological seedbed, never surpasses it, but always returns to it. The empirical question for Vico and other historians of civilization is to explain how and under what conditions this happens.

In these later writings, Vico concentrates on the substantive facts of human existence which are represented most directly in human history. By this time Vico had moved to a triad beyond *verum-factum*, namely *verum-factum-bonum*. This represents the process of how persons use language and intersubjective communication to make worlds, and to make their way through the world. This is the making that creates history, and truth resides in purer form here than any provisional truths that are ascertained or conjured about nature.

Vico views language as the first law, the first *certum*. Language is especially crucial in the interpretation of the poetics of early or primitive humanity. *Verum-factum* is the convertibility of the made with truth, but there should also be a way of showing those instances of false factum, so that we may move to authoritative proclamations of what is. The law (*certum*) is one such vehicle for making this distinction. There is not only making but mis-making, the latter of which plagued pagan society. Much of this is a reworking of Augustine's *Civitas Dei* (*City of God*), in which he makes a distinction between, on the one hand, idolatry which is condemnable and, on the other hand, legitimate forms of divine expression which, when understood accurately, give some glimpses of not only the true but also the good and the beautiful.<sup>160</sup>

Vico warns that philosophical and theological texts are inadequate to grasp the origins of history and culture, because such texts are often a concealment. The question of first origins is difficult. How do we get at them? Culture gives a glimpse of subjectivity, but is it possible to conceptualize a pre-cultural humanity? Well, we cast this possibility off into the brutish existence of the savage horde which is closer to animal than human existence. The question of human origins posits "transcendental origins," to get from the pre-cultural humanity to actual cultural

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<sup>160</sup> Augustine, *City of God*.

humanity. But this metaphysical transcendence is not the later Kantian transcendality. This is the aporia that must be investigated and secured according to Milbank.

Vico presents a system of propositions that document the errors of philosophers and philologists, such as the “conceit of nations.”<sup>161</sup> How are we to overcome these? Through the *verum-factum* principle. This introduces a genetic method whereby incipient cultural products can be known. Culture is accepted as something superfluous to nature, and the principle must be established from which springs all various types of human culture. Because culture is always already begun, it can only be understood in its unfolding and development. This seems clearly to foreshadow Hegel. Hence, early human thought and culture can be retrieved only through language. We must trace the dominant pattern of repetition (this became a crucial element in Leibniz, Kierkegaard, and later Tarde). The three dominant patterns, emerging as cultural institutions and imperatives, are marriage, burial, and belief in providence.<sup>162</sup> For Vico, there is no absolute originality, or at least it cannot be assured through the methods available to us (Cartesian or otherwise). The pattern of repetition guards against rampant skepticism. If the patterns identified do not extend into the present, whereby they are meaningful and intelligible, history ends. The constancy of mimesis (imitation) is crucial for the new principle of *factum-verum*.

Metaphysical and theological speculation enter here. Just as God gave the original word, so, too, human culture emerges through the projection of subjectivity through language. Within this, the theory of the origins of language posits that *factum* has true priority, and metaphor is the first constituting unit of language.<sup>163</sup> It is factum in that language is a concrete artefact, but also is non-instrumental. That is, each particular human grouping makes particular sounds or symbols which do the job

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161 Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico*, Part 2, p. 16.

162 Ibid., p. 19.

163 Ibid., p. 29.

of communication culminating in culture. But it is not purely arbitrary, because certain patterns in human groupings seem to emerge, those of burial, marriage, and providence. Activities in the world seek linguistic realization because human beings are relational and not solitary.<sup>164</sup> They seek to communicate with others and share in the creation of common activities. This is a copy of the primordial impulses of massing together in swarms or herds for mutual protection. Hence, language is not merely representation but a metaphorical mimesis.

How to square the existence of a feral pre-cultural humanity with the Biblical story of origins? For example, how did the multiplicity of human languages develop short of the Tower of Babel? Was there an original Adamic language?<sup>165</sup> There could be an attempt to lay this at the feet of primitive pagan groups, who have yet to attain enlightenment inspired by the true religious calling of later antiquity. Vico makes a distinction between the pagans of the east—the Chaldeans—and the pagans of the west—the Graeco-Romans.<sup>166</sup> It is the latter that are closer to Hebraic language, which indicates a more elevated wisdom which connects this particular strand of paganism with later Christian developments. Although there is influence from the past, Vico is determined to argue a significant break between paganism and the Adamic inheritance.<sup>167</sup> Vico is able to refer to the bestial primitive man and Machiavellianism resulting from the fall. This leads to the vast gulf between the Hebrews and gentiles. He also seeks to harmonize his account of human origins with the flood. Natural cosmic activities and catastrophes could be squared with biblical prophecy. This was the physical backdrop for the birth of

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164 Mustafa Emirbayer, "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (2), 1997, 281-317.

165 See Giorgio Agamben, "The Tree of Language," *Journal of Italian Philosophy* 1, 2018b, 12-21 and Michael Laffin, "Babel, Tyranny, and Totality: Reading Genesis 11 with Luther," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 31 (4), 2018, 408-421.

166 Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico, 1668-1744: Part 2*, p. 33.

167 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

gentile humanity. This of course is reflected in Vico's eternal cycle of history (covered earlier).

Some certainly may be opposed to Milbank's theological reading of Vico, but I want to argue that when theology enters into the philosophical discussion, strangeness abounds and there is no easy way to sort out immanence from transcendence, truth from fact, or metaphysics from foundations (and indeed, the foundations themselves could be metaphysical as upward and downward reductions are possible). Both of these endeavors have the potential for wild speculation, and this particular exercise of mine may simply reflect some agitation with speculative philosophy colored by my own grounding in positivistic sociology and criminology. But being open to grand theory, whereby the totality of human experience is postulated and analytical frameworks for its capture are developed, the strangeness of theological speculation and philosophical deconstruction are allowed entry into the discussion. I take these as data points for further reflection, but no firm evaluation of their worth can be generated at this point. This may indeed be an open project where meaning and final resolutions are endlessly deferred. I frankly do not know. The only certainty I take away from such exercises is my agreement with Herbert Spencer over the existence of two great regions of knowledge, namely, the Known and the Unknown.<sup>168</sup> This is still the best statement that exists on the chasm between science and religion, between immanence and transcendence, between ultimate truths and worldly facts, between construction and deconstruction, and between boundaries and their limits.

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## The lively voice of Critical Theory

Berlin Journal of Critical Theory (BJCT) is a peer-reviewed journal which is published in both electronic and print formats by Xenomoi Verlag in Berlin. The goal is to focus on the critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School and to extend their theories to our age. Unfortunately, it seems that most of the concerns and theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are neglected in its second and third generations.

We believe that the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are still capable of explaining many social, cultural, and political problems of our time. However, in some cases, we need to revise those theories. For example, the culture industry in our time can also work with a different mechanism from that described by Adorno and Horkheimer. In our age, the majorities can access the media and even respond to the messages which they receive – this is something which was not possible in Adorno and Horkheimer's time. But this doesn't mean that the culture industry's domination is over. Thus, we may need to revise the theory of the culture industry to explain the new forms of cultural domination in our age.

Therefore, we are planning to link the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt school to the problems of our age. This means that we are looking for original and high-quality articles in the field of critical theory. To reach our goals, we gathered some of the leading scholars of critical theory in our editorial board to select the best articles for this journal.

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