**PG SEM III, CC 3.3. COURSE :CULTURAL THEORY**

(In continuation of my earlier note—HOW CRITICAL IS CRITICAL THEORY.

**1.** **Critical Theory as Metaphilosophy: Philosophy, Ideology and Truth**

The best way to show how Critical Theory offers a distinctive philosophical approach is to locate it historically in German Idealism and its aftermath. For Marx and his generation, Hegel was the last in the grand tradition of philosophical thought able to give us secure knowledge of humanity and history on its own. The issue for Left Hegelians and Marx was then somehow to overcome Hegelian “theoretical” philosophy, and Marx argues that it can do so only by making philosophy “practical,” in the sense of changing practices by which societies realize their ideals. Once reason was thoroughly socialized and made historical, historicist skepticism emerged at the same time, attempting to relativize philosophical claims about norms and reason to historically and culturally variable forms of life. Critical Theory developed a nonskeptical version of this conception, linking philosophy closely to the human and social sciences. In so doing, it can link empirical and interpretive social science to normative claims of truth, morality and justice, traditionally the purview of philosophy. While it defends the emphasis on normativity and universalist ambitions found in the philosophical tradition, it does so within the context of particular sorts of empirical social research, with which it has to cooperate if it is to understand such normative claims within the current historical context. After presenting the two main versions of this conception of philosophy, I turn to an illuminating example of how this cooperative relation between philosophy and the social sciences works from the point of view of the main figures in Critical Theory who sought to develop it: the critique of ideology, a form of criticism which if generalized threatens to undermine the critical stance itself as one more ideology. Even if Critical Theorists are united in a common philosophical project, this example shows the large differences between the first and second generation concerning the normative justification of social criticism.

In the modern era, philosophy defines its distinctive role in relation to the sciences. While for Locke philosophy was a mere “underlaborer,” for Kant it had a loftier status. As Rorty and others have put it, transcendental philosophy has two distinct roles: first, as the tribunal of Reason, the ultimate court of appeal before which disciplines stand and must justify themselves and secondly, as the domain for normative questions left out of naturalistic inquiry. In light of this ability to judge the results of the sciences, philosophy can also organize knowledge, assigning to each of them their proper sphere and scope. The Kantian solution denies the need for direct cooperation with the sciences on issues related to normativity, since these were determined independently through transcendental analysis of the universal and necessary conditions for reason in its theoretical and practical employment. Echoes of the subsequent post-Hegelian criticisms of Kantian transcendental philosophy are found in the early work of Horkheimer and Marcuse. Indeed, Horkheimer criticizes “traditional theory” in light of the rejection of its representational view of knowledge and its nonhistorical subject. Echoing Marx in The German Ideology, Horkheimer insists that for a critical theory “the world and subjectivity in all its forms have developed with the life processes of society”. Much like certain naturalists today, he argued that “materialism requires the unification of philosophy and science,” thus denying any substantive distinction between science and philosophy. As Horkheimer understood the task of Critical Theory, philosophical problems are preserved by taking a role in defining problems for research, and philosophical reflection retains a privileged role in organizing the results of empirical research into a unified whole.

This understanding of the relation of philosophy and the sciences remains broadly Kantian. Even while rejecting the role of philosophy as transcendental judge, he still endorses its normative role, to the extent that it still has the capacity to organize the claims of empirical forms of knowledge and to assign each a role in the normative enterprise of reflection on historically and socially contextualized reason. This unstable mixture of naturalism with a normative philosophical orientation informed much of the critical social science of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s.

According to this conception of materialism, Critical Theory could operate with a theoretical division of labor in which philosophy's normative stance could criticize the embodiments of reason and morality according to their internal criteria. At least for modern societies, such an enterprise of “immanent critique” was possible. However, Horkheimer and Marcuse saw the skeptical and relativist stance of the emerging sociology of knowledge, particularly that of Karl Mannheim, as precisely opposed to that of Critical Theory. As Marcuse puts it, “sociology that is only interested in the dependent and limited nature of consciousness has nothing to do with truth. While useful in many ways it has falsified the interest and goal of any critical theory”. As opposed to merely debunking criticism, “a critical theory is concerned with preventing the loss of truth that past knowledge has labored to attain.” Given Critical Theory's orientation to human emancipation, it seeks to contextualize philosophical claims to truth and moral universality without reducing them to social and historical conditions. Horkheimer formulates this skeptical fallacy that informed much of the sociologically informed relativism of his time in this way: “That all our thoughts, true or false, depend on conditions that can change in no way affects the validity of science. It is not clear why the conditioned character of thought should affect the truth of a judgment—why shouldn't insight be just as conditioned as error?”. The core claim here is that fallibilism is different from relativism, suggesting that it is possible to distinguish between truth and the context of justification of claims to truth.

Faced with a sociological naturalism that relativized claims to truth and justice are necessary for social criticism, the challenge could be answered by detranscendentalizing truth without losing its normativity. Indeed it is relativism that depends on an implausible and ahistorical form of detachment and impartiality, especially expressed in its methodological commitments to “reverential empathy and description.” The skepticism offered by historicism and the sociology of knowledge is ultimately merely theoretical, the skepticism of an observer who takes the disengaged view from nowhere. Once the skeptic has to take up the practical stance, alternatives to such paper doubt become inevitable. Indeed, the critic must identify just whose practical stance best reveals these possibilities as agents for social transformation of current circumstances. As I point out in the next section, the Frankfurt School most often applied ideology critique to liberal individualism, pointing out its contextual limitations that lead to reductionist and pernicious interpretations of democratic ideals.

Despite the force of these antirelativist and antiskeptical arguments, two problems emerge in claims made by Horkheimer and Marcuse to underwrite some “emphatic” conception of truth or justice. First, philosophy is given the task of organizing social research and providing its practical aims even in the absence of the justification of its superior capacities. A more modest and thoroughly empirical approach would be more appropriate and defensible. Second, the source of this confidence seems to be practical, that critics must immanently discover those transformative agents whose struggles take up these normative contents of philosophy and attempt to realize them. But once this practical possibility no longer seems feasible, then this approach would either be purely philosophical or it would turn against the potentialities of the present. Indeed, during the rise of fascism in the Second World War and the commodified culture afterwards, the Frankfurt School became skeptical of the possibility of agency, as the subjective conditions for social transformation were on their view undermined.

It is clear that in Dialectic of Enlightenment Horkheimer and Adorno abandoned this interdisciplinary materialist approach with its emphasis on cooperation with the social sciences. Adorno and Horkheimer did not to deny the achievements of the Enlightenment, but rather wanted to show that it had “self-destructive tendencies,” that its specific social, cultural and conceptual forms realized in modern Europe “contained its own possibility of a reversal that is universally apparent today”. Since Adorno and Horkheimer planned to offer a positive way out of the dialectic of Enlightenment at the time they wrote these words, this reversal is by no means inevitable. Even if their specific historical story of the emergence of Enlightenment reason out of myth is no longer so convincing, it is not enough to say with Habermas that The Dialectic of Enlightenment did not “do justice to the rational content of cultural modernity”. For the positive task of avoiding the reversal of Enlightenment, reconstructing the rational content of modernity is not enough, since the issue is not to affirm its universalism, but its self-critical and emancipatory capacity. If the issue is the self-correcting capacity of the Enlightenment, two questions emerge: how is it undermined? Where do we locate the exercise of this capacity? This is the “Enlightenment problem,” the solution to which is twofold: to reconstruct those human capacities that have such reflexivity built into them and to tie the operation of Enlightenment institutions to the conditions of their successful exercise.

Against this skeptical predicament of the first generation of Critical Theory, it could be said without exaggeration that Habermas's basic philosophical endeavor from Knowledge and Human Interests to The Theory of Communicative Action has been to develop a more modest, fallibilist, empirical account of the philosophical claim to universality and rationality. This more modest approach rids Critical Theory of its vestiges of transcendental philosophy, pushing it in a naturalistic direction. Such naturalism identifies more specific forms of social scientific knowledge that help in developing an analysis of the general conditions of rationality manifested in various human capacities and powers. Thus, Habermas's alternative sees practical knowledge, or reason in the robust sense, as it is “embodied in cognition, speech and action”. Habermas's calls for particular “reconstructive sciences,” whose aim it is to render theoretically explicit the intuitive, pretheoretical know-how underlying such basic human competences as speaking and understanding, judging, and acting. Unlike Kant's transcendental analysis of the conditions of rationality, such sciences yield knowledge that is not necessary but hypothetical, not a priori but empirical, not certain but fallible. They are nevertheless directed to universal structures and conditions and raise universal, but defeasible claims to an account of practical reason. In this way, Habermas undermines both of the traditional Kantian roles for philosophy and brings them into a fully cooperative relation to the social sciences. This can be seen in the clear differences between his account of the critique of ideology, which is at once contextualist and antirelativist but also underwrites its own normativity in ways that Horkheimer and Marcuse's more nearly transcendental account could not, given the inevitable tension between philosophical ideals and the historical conditions of current societies and their practices.

Like many other such theories, the theory of communicative action offers its own distinctive definition of rationality. In good pragmatist fashion, Habermas's definition is epistemic, practical, and intersubjective. For Habermas, rationality consists not so much in the possession of knowledge and thus primarily concerned with the consistency and content of one's beliefs, but rather in “how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge”. Such a broad definition suggests that the theory could be developed through explicating the general and formal conditions of validity in knowing and reaching understanding through language, and this task falls primarily on “formal pragmatics.” As one among many different “reconstructive sciences,” such a reconstruction of speech is inherently normative, in the sense that it is one of the disciplines that reconstructs a common domain: “the know-how of subjects who are capable of speech and action, who are attributed the capacity to produce valid utterances, and who consider themselves capable of distinguishing (at least intuitively) between valid and invalid expressions”. The positive goal of such a theory is not only to provide an account of rationality based on this know-how that is rich enough to grasp uses of reason in all their variety, yet also normative enough to be able to clarify the necessary conditions for its practical employment as well as a critical analysis of the “pathologies” that occur when these conditions fail to obtain.

More than just reconstructing an implicitly normative know-how, Habermas is clear that such reconstructive sciences have a “quasi-transcendental” status by specifying very general and formal conditions of successful communication. In this way, their concern with normativity and with the abilities needed for rationality in Habermas's practical and social sense permits them to acquire a critical role. Certainly, the goal of the reconstructive sciences is theoretical knowledge: they make such practical know-how explicit. But insofar as they are capable of explicating the conditions for valid or correct utterances, they also explain why some utterances are invalid, some speech acts unsuccessful, and some argumentation inadequate. Thus, such sciences “also explain deviant cases and through this indirect authority acquire a critical function as well”. This authority then permits the theory of rationality to underwrite critical claims about social and political practices, to show how their functioning violates not only the espoused rules but also the conditions of rationality.

Such an approach can be applied to normative features of democratic practices. Rather than only providing a set of explicit principles of justification and institutional decision rules, democracy is also a particular structure of free and open communication. Ideology restricts or limits such processes of communication and undermines the conditions of success within them. Ideology as distorted communication affects both the social conditions in which democratic discussion takes place and the processes of communication that go on within them. The theory of ideology, therefore, analyzes the ways in which linguistic-symbolic meanings are used to encode, produce, and reproduce relations of power and domination, even within institutional spheres of communication and interaction governed by norms that make democratic ideals explicit in normative procedures and constraints. As a reconstruction of the potentially correct insights behind Marx's exaggerated rejection of liberalism, the theory of distorted communication is therefore especially suited to the ways in which meanings are used to reproduce power even under explicit rules of equality and freedom. This is not to say that explicit rules are unimportant: they make it possible for overt forms of coercion and power to be constrained, the illegitimacy of which requires no appeal to norms implicit in practices.

Democratic norms of freedom can be made explicit in various rights, including civil rights of participation and free expression. Such norms are often violated explicitly in exercises of power for various ends, such as wealth, security, or cultural survival. Besides these explicit rights, such coercion also violates the communicative freedom expressed in ignoring the need to pass decisions through the taking of yes/no attitudes by participants in communication. Habermas calls such speech that is not dependent on these conditions of communicative rationality “distorted communication.” For example, powerful economic groups have historically been able to attain their agency goals without explicitly excluding topics from democratic discussion but by implied threats and other non deliberative means. Threats of declining investments block redistributive schemes, so that credible threats circumvent the need to convince others of the reasons for such policies or to put some issue under democratic control. Similarly, biases in agenda setting within organizations and institutions limit scope of deliberation and restrict political communication by defining those topics that can be successfully become the subject of public agreement. In this way, it is easy to see how such a reconstructive approach connects directly to social scientific analyses of the consistency of democratic norms with actual political behavior.

This theory of ideology as distorted communication opens up the possibility of a different relation of theoretical and practical knowledge than Habermas has suggested so far. His approach uses formal pragmatics philosophically to reflect upon norms and practices that are already explicit in justifications in various sorts of argumentation or second-order communication. Such reflection has genuine practical significance in yielding explicit rules governing discursive communication (such as rules of argumentation), which in turn can be used for the purpose of designing and reforming deliberative and discursive institutions. It is easily overlooked that such rules are only part of the story; they make explicit and institutionalize norms that are already operative in correct language use. Such implicit norms of well-formed and communicatively successful utterances are not identical with the explicit rules of argumentation.

These claims about norms raise two difficulties. First, there is a potential regress of rules, that is, that explicit rules requires further rules to apply them, and so on. Second, this approach cannot capture how norms are often only implicit in practices rather than explicitly expressed. Here Habermas sides with Pettit in seeing the central function of explicit norms as creating a commons that can serve as the basis for institutionalizing norms, a space in which the content of norms and concepts can be put up for rational reflection and revision. Making such implicit norms explicit is thus also the main task of the interpretive social scientist and is a potential source of social criticism; it is then the task of the participant-critic in the democratic public sphere to change them. There is one more possible role for the philosophically informed social critic. As we have seen in the case of ideological speech, the reconstructive sciences “also explain deviant cases and through this indirect authority acquire a critical function as well”.

In this section, I have discussed claims that are distinctive of the metaphilosophy of Critical Theorists of both generations of the Frankfurt School and illustrated the ways in which critical normativity can be exercised in their differing models of the critique of ideology. Critical Theorists attempt to fulfill potentially two desiderata at the same time: first, they want to maintain the normativity of philosophical conceptions such as truth or justice, while at the same time they want to examine the contexts in which they have developed and may best be promoted practically. I argued that the first generation theorists avoided the relativism of sociologies of knowledge such as Mannheim's only to fall into a practical skepticism about the feasibility of agents acting upon such norms in current contexts. Habermas's conception of the cooperation between philosophy and the social sciences in rational reconstruction of practical knowledge allows him to articulate a normative conception of “real democracy” more fully and to develop a social scientifically informed conception of democracy that is an alternative to current liberal practices. This project shifts the goal of critical social inquiry from human emancipation as such, to the primary concern with democratic institutions as the location for the realization of ideals of freedom and equality. The limits on any such realization may prove to be not merely ideological: Critical Theory is also interested in those social facts and circumstances that constrain the realization of the ideal democracy and force us to reconsider its normative content. While such an account of the relation between facts and norms answers the sociological skepticism of Weber and others about the future of democracy, it may be based on an overly limited account of social facts.

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