

Axel Honneth



PATHOLOGIES *of* REASON

« On the Legacy of Critical Theory »

Translated by James Ingram

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« *On the Legacy of Critical Theory* »

Axel Honneth

Translated by James Ingram and others

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PREFACE

In this volume, I have collected essays that, although apparently disparate, emphasize the timeliness of Critical Theory. There may seem to be little call for this today. A series of excellent studies on the history of the Frankfurt School, along with monographs on individual representatives over the past decades, have clarified the multiformity of the approaches we attribute to this theoretical tradition that arose in the 1920s. Indeed, the real difficulty may well consist in identifying the unity of a single Critical Theory in the multiplicity of its theoretical forms. The solution I have found for this problem in my own investigations is contained in the title of the present volume. Through all their disparateness of method and object, the various authors of the Frankfurt School are united in the idea that the living conditions of modern capitalist societies produce social practices, attitudes, or personal structures that result in a pathological deformation of our capacities for reason. It is this theme that establishes the unity of Critical Theory in the plurality of its voices. As heterogeneous as the works bound to it may be, they always aim at exploring the social causes of a pathology of human rationality.

But the theme of regarding the living conditions of our societies as causes of a possible deformation of reason also indicates where I see the timeliness of Critical Theory. Today, primarily under the pressures of aimless professionalization, there is a threat that the bond between philosophy and social analysis will be conclusively broken. With this, a central heritage of German Idealism—namely, the chance to understand rationality as dependent on social-historical processes—begins to disappear as a possibility of thought. In this situation, Critical Theory, as obsolete as some of its approaches may be, represents a salutary challenge. Further developing it would mean, while including theoretical renewals, exploring once again for the present whether the specific constitution of our social practices and institutions damages the human capacity for reason. In the second essay collected here, I have tried to sketch what individual tasks today would be connected to such a reactualization of Critical Theory. This will also make it clear why I think it makes sense to include contributions on Kant's philosophy of history and Freud's concept of freedom in this volume.

Along with Gunhild Mewes, whose help with the technical preparation of the manuscript was irreplaceable, I want to thank Eva Gilmer and Bernd Stiegler from Suhrkamp Verlag, who have from the beginning provided me with friendly advice on the planning of this volume.

Frankfurt am Main, February 2007

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THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF PROGRESS

Kant's Account of the Relationship Between Morality and History

At the very start of the second section of his essay “The Contest of the Faculties,” at the center of which stands the now famous idea of “signs in history,” Kant mocks a certain category of the prophetic narrating of history. His ridicule is directed at all those prophets, politicians, and intellectuals who in the past presumed to be able to predict a decline of morality or a political-cultural decadence. Such soothsayings, Kant says with unconcealed irony, are nothing other than self-fulfilling prophecies. Indeed, the authors of such prophecies, through their own misdeeds, have themselves essentially contributed to history, having taken precisely the negative direction of development that they believed they could anticipate.¹ The proximity to Walter Benjamin that appears to flash up through such remarks is not accidental, nor is it trivial in relation to Kant's work. On the lowest level of his philosophy of history, precisely where it concerns the affective meaningfulness of factual events and occurrences, Kant is much as the author of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” was convinced that everything social derives from an “origin” that “the historical interpreter cannot contemplate without horror.”²

Like Benjamin, Kant sees historical development up to the present as largely a product of the intentions and deeds of the victors. Under their “unjust coercion,”³ the horrors and “crimes against human nature”⁴ pile up into veritable mountains, such that all the sensitive historical observer can perceive in this historically unordered material is one singular “sighing” of humanity. But Kant did not wish to remain satisfied—and here, too, there is a kinship with Benjamin—with merely chronicling such a victors' history. At least in the last thirty years of his life, Kant was much more preoccupied with the question of whether or not the signs of a “turn for the better”⁵ could be elicited from the vale of tears that is the historical process. Indeed, Kant's philosophy of history was born out of the impulse to correct the uncompensated wrongs of the past by representing such wrongs as the “spur to activity . . . towards the better.”⁶ Even before fulfilling any of its systematic tasks in the architectonics of his work, Kant's philosophy of history represents the ambitious attempt to brush history against the grain in order to tear it away from the hands of the supposed victors.⁷

Admittedly, the path that Kant opens up in order to achieve this goal is completely different from that of Benjamin. While the author of the Arcades project wanted to solve this problem by attempting to resume an interrupted communication with the countless victims of the past through the construction of magical memoryimages,⁸ the Königsberg philosopher approached the task with entirely different methodological resources. Kant was neither familiar with the perspective of a writing of history from below nor really able to foresee the ideological danger of an unreflective optimism concerning historical progress. Instead, Kant had before him as an opponent a form of the philosophy of history that unintentionally shares the condescending view of the victors. Such a historical view has no confidence that the common people have

any aptitude for moral improvement, and hence this view sees everything negativistically, a being dragged into a continuous process of decline. Kant's attempt at a construction of historical progress is opposed to such a negative-triumphalist or, as he puts it, "terrorist conception" of history, within which the guilt of the dominant for the "piling up of atrocities" is inevitably denied.⁹

In what follows, I am interested in the question as to what kind of theoretical meaning the historical-philosophical hypothesis of progress can have that would still be relevant for our present context. To provide an answer to this question, I must, of course, avert attention from the affective sediment of the Kantian philosophy of history and bring into view its systematic grounding in the architectonics of Kant's work. I wish to proceed by (1) reconstructing Kant's different justifications for the assumption of historical progress and (2) explaining his presentation of this process of historical progress itself. In the course of this, I shall distinguish in both parts of my presentation between the system-conforming and the system-bursting or, so to speak, unorthodox, versions of historical progress. This is in order, finally, to be able to show at the end that only a combination of both system-bursting versions of progress can prompt us to confer a systematic meaning on the Kantian philosophy of history once again. At the same time, a new light will be cast, I hope, on the relationship between the Kantian and the Hegelian philosophy of history.



Kant is known to have had two, if not three, explanations for why we should have the right methodologically to comprehend human history, taken as a whole, as a purpose-directed process of progress. It is not rare to find even in one and the same text two of these justificatory approaches immediately next to one another; indeed, the impression is not entirely unjustified that Kant hesitated between these different alternatives right up to the end of his life.¹⁰ Among the competing frameworks, the one that without doubt possesses the most prominence today is the one that a series of interpreters have quite rightly designated as "theoretical" or "cognitive"¹¹ because its point of departure is a theoretical interest of our reason. Accordingly, we have at our disposal a thoroughly legitimate need to unify our view of the world, which is torn between law-governed nature and freedom. We reconstruct the unordered happenings of the past according to the heuristic theme of an intention of nature and we do this so that it appears to us as though it were a process of political and moral progress. Kant had in fact developed this argument, in its basic features, in his essay "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" (1784). But it is only in section 83 of his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) that we find the formulations that must have halfway satisfied Kant methodologically. If we leave out of consideration the differences between the two writings, taken together they present us with the most suitable textual foundation to illustrate Kant's first justificatory model for the hypothesis of progress.

The starting point of this construction consists in the thesis that our reason cannot be satisfied with leaving a gulf that continues to persist between the realm of the laws of nature

and the sphere of moral freedom. Rather, we possess a purely cognitive interest in giving unity to the law-governed world of appearances, a unity that is later transposed into a continuum with the principles of our practical self-determination. This need for an integration of both worlds complies with our capacity for reflective judgment. In contrast to determinative inferences or judgments, reflective judgment does not derive particulars from universal principles; rather, it can supply a universal for a plurality of particular appearances.¹² The category of “purposiveness” is the conceptual principle that stands at the disposal of reflective judgment, in the same aprioristic way the moral law does for practical reason and causality does for theoretical reason. If we now apply this thought of “purposiveness,” conceived through reflective judgment, to the field of human history, as Kant does in *Critique of Judgment*, section 83, we get a methodological justification of history: history’s “senseless course”¹³ can be understood counterfactually, so to speak, as the result of a purpose-directed intention, one that nature pursues with us human beings throughout all of our deplorable confusion.

From this point, it is only another small step to the hypothesis of progress, in which Kant’s philosophy of history culminates. To the question of which purpose it could, in fact, be, that nature, heuristically taken as a subject, has assumed with respect to human history, Kant answers in agreement with his system that this cannot be human happiness. Rather, it can only be our aptitude “in general for setting [ourselves] purposes,”¹⁴ hence our practical freedom. Accordingly, we are permitted to use the heuristic theme of an intention of nature for the retrospective reflection on our own history, in order to think the multitude of lamentable seemingly chaotic events as an ordered unity. Such a unity is what the model of a directed process of improvement of our aptitude for the positing of purposes would allow us to see. The concept encompassing all the enabling conditions of such practical freedom is what Kant calls “culture,”¹⁵ the development of which breaks down, according to him, into the competing strands of the civilizing of our nature as need-driven beings and the improvement of our cultural and intellectual “skills.” This picture of a progress in human culture intended by nature, however, is only rounded out if Kant’s supplementary remark is taken into account: namely, that both the disciplining of need and the extension of mental aptitudes could only really succeed under the conditions of a civil constitutional state—indeed, a cosmopolitan arrangement ensuring peace.¹⁶

Now it is evident that Kant was never really satisfied with this first justificatory model of his hypothesis of progress. For the very fact that he added the phrase “With a Cosmopolitan Purpose” to the title of his essay “Idea of a Universal History” indicates that he also attempted to provide his construction with a practical moral justification.¹⁷ An alternative of this sort can be found everywhere in Kant’s writings that he allows the counterfactual assumption of the purpose-directed effectiveness of nature in human history to be grounded in a practical, not theoretical, interest of our reason. The primary writings to mention in this context are “On the Common Saying: ‘This May Be True in Theory but It Does Not Apply in Practice’” (1793) and “Perpetual Peace” (1795), both composed after the completion of the *Critique of Judgment*. Kant argues here in a genuinely different manner than in the framework of his first justificatory model inasmuch as he maintains that the hypothesis of historical progress is an undertaking that is indispensable as a condition of making possible and realizing the moral law. For compliance with the categorical imperative demands that we regard the realizability of the moral ought as something that itself could already be effective in the historical past. One

again, it is necessary to abstract here from the differences between the two relevant essays in order to identify very briefly the core of the Kantian argument.

This time the starting point of Kant's reflections is not found in the viewpoint of an observer who has missed a cognitive association between nature and freedom. Rather, it is found in the perspective of an agent who knows himself or herself to be bound to the moral law. Everything Kant says in the following is therefore valid only under the restricting condition that the moral standpoint has already been taken up. For subjects with such an orientation, we must be able to say that they must regard the realizability of the moral ought as something possible if they do not want to fail in their task from the start. Indeed, already in the *Critique of Practical Reason* it was said that moral duty must be presupposed as possible, for "it would be practically impossible to strive for the object of a concept that would be, at bottom, empty and without object."¹⁸ Now, Kant executes the decisive step in his argumentation with the thesis that this presupposition of the attainability of the morally good possesses both an intersubjective and a temporal dimension, because such a presupposition must be applied to all moral agents in the past, present, and future. We who share the moral standpoint must represent for ourselves not only our cooperating contemporaries but also the well-intentioned members of past and future generations as subjects who are convinced of the realizability of the good. With such an act of universalization, which Kant manifestly held to be unavoidable, however, the moral agent is placed in a position where he or she can no longer avoid assuming a tendency in human history toward the better. For already with the idea that the intentions of like-minded peers in the past could not have remained entirely fruitless, there unavoidably follows for Kant the idea of an increasing yield of moral deeds from generation to generation. Hence Kant believes that he can say of the subject who knows himself to be bound to the moral standpoint that such a subject must be able to represent history, in the interests of the realizability of the good, in no other way than as a movement toward the better that is never entirely "broken off."¹⁹

Kant himself, however, appears to trust this second construction so little that, as with the previous one, he does not let it get by entirely without the operation that the epistemic doubt performs by means of his reflective power of judgment in the face of the gulf between freedom and necessity. The certainty of progress that the moral actor develops because he grants the same strength of will to all of his predecessors that he has to grant to himself is not sufficient, according to Kant, to equip him with an adequate measure of certainty. Hence in the end, Kant also prescribes to such an actor a proportioned use of his power of judgment in order to reassure himself against doubts that may arise about the purposiveness of nature, which "visibly exhibits [a] purposive plan"²⁰ arising from historical chaos. It is this retrospective reassurance regarding an intention of nature that in the last instance provides the moral actor with a feeling of guarantee that he is contributing, through his own efforts, to the advancement of a process toward the good. As the first model does for the cognitively concerned subject, Kant's second model gives the morally hesitating subject the task of heuristically securing for itself a progress of history willed by nature, a task whereby the subject "reflectively" constructs and adds to the chaotic multiplicity of historical events the plan of a purpose-directed unfolding of history.

The two justificatory models that we have become acquainted with thus far are each closely connected with theoretical premises that arise from Kant's three *Critiques*. In the first model this internal connection comes to light in the idea of a progress generated by nature, which

presented as the construction that our reflective power of judgment uses to react to the cognitive dissonance between the law-governedness of nature and moral freedom. In the second model, a similar connection becomes apparent, but here Kant allows the moral agent to be ruled by a degree of doubt concerning the practical effectiveness of his actions, a move that appears necessary only under the assumption of a pure, unsullied obedience to the moral law, undisturbed by empirical inclinations. Since both constructions, as has been shown, are marked in different ways by the train of thought that Kant encountered with his two-world doctrine, it cannot be surprising that the two together, albeit for different reasons, take refuge in the concept of the power of judgment. In the first case, the hypothetical construction of an intention of nature that guarantees progress satisfies an interest of our theoretical reason; in the second case, it satisfies a need pertaining to our practical reason. The third model that emerges in broad outline in Kant's historical-philosophical writings appears to be relatively free of additions of this sort, for the extent to which the problematic presuppositions of the two-world doctrine play a role in this model remains restricted.

A first indication of this third model can already be found in the text "On the Common Saying," which in essence presented the basis for the second construction proposal I have just sketched. In an inconspicuous passage, Kant says there of Moses Mendelssohn—for Kant, the typical representative of a "terroristic" conception of history—that he, too, "must have reckoned" on a progress toward the better, "since he zealously endeavored to promote the enlightenment and welfare of the nation to which he belonged."²¹ The argument Kant employs here is perhaps best described as "hermeneutic" but possibly also as "explicative." Kant attempts to make intelligible or to explicate which concept of history someone who understands their own writerly activity as a contribution to a process of enlightenment would necessarily have to commit themselves to. A subject with such a self-understanding, Kant wants to demonstrate, has no alternative than to understand the developmental process that precedes him as the gradual achievement of something better and, conversely, to construe the time that still lies before him as an opportunity for further improvement. For the normative standards according to which this subject measures the moral quality of his current circumstances in his practical engagements demand from him that he judge the conditions of the past as inferior and the potential circumstances of the future as superior. The remark a few lines later, in which Kant attempts once again to refute Mendelssohn's view of history, can also be interpreted in the sense of this "transcendentally" necessary orientation of meaning.

That the outcry about man's continually increasing decadence [i.e., of the human race] arises for the very reason that we can see further ahead because we have reached a higher level of morality. We thus pass more severe judgments on what we are, comparing it with what we ought to be, so that our self-reproach increases in proportion to the number of stages of morality we have advanced through during the whole of known history.²²

The building blocks of the explicative or hermeneutic justificatory model that can be glimpsed through these lines are conspicuous in both of Kant's historical-philosophical contributions; these are the only ones that contain no reference to an "intention of nature." Indeed, they make use of the thought—not utterly implausible, even today—of a natural disposition of human beings toward freedom. Yet at no point do they mention the idea of a purposiveness willed by nature, the idea that played such an important role in the writings we have dealt with up to this point. The first of these texts, the essay "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" (1784), appeared six years before the *Critique of Judgment*; the second

text, "Contest of the Faculties" (1798), was published eight years after the publication of the third *Critique*. Hence it might be the case that both contributions were composed with sufficient distance from that key work that they were not intellectually ruled by its proposal of the notion of an "intention of nature."

The entirely distinct character of the new model, as opposed to the approaches sketched previously, already becomes clear in the fact that Kant now appears to have a completely different circle of addressees in mind. He no longer turns to the observer of world history animated by cognitive doubts but also no longer to the historically unlocated, so to speak situationless, moral subject. Rather, Kant turns toward an enlightened public, who in one way or another are participants in a political and moral process of transformation. What also changes with this altered form of address is the role of Kant as author, as he attempts to demonstrate the irreducibility of the concept of historical progress. He speaks as a disinterested but nonetheless understanding and sympathetic observer who wants to show those who participate in the historical process of transformation which implicit presuppositions they would have to be able to observe in their own remarks and actions if they were to take up the role of spectators of themselves. In both texts, the historical reference point that allows the readership to be addressed as practical participants is roughly the same, even if, of course, some differences subsist because of the time lag between them. In the earlier essay it is the political consolidation of enlightenment, conceived of as a lengthy process during the reign of Frederick II; in the historical-philosophical second section of "Contest of the Faculties," it is the decisive historical break in mentality brought about by the French Revolution.

Kant now wants to show that those individuals who affirmatively (indeed, enthusiastically) sympathize with these events—justified as they are on the grounds of practical reason—have thereby implicitly committed themselves through such affirmation to understanding the course of human history, which initially seemed chaotic, as a practical-moral process of progress. The standpoint of their historical consciousness shifts in the moment of affirmation because now they must unify all historically prior occurrences and circumstances in light of the more recent developments into a directed process in which the moral achievements of the present mark a successful intermediary stage. The identification with the idea of universal civil and human rights—as they attained expression with the political reforms of Frederick II or with the constitutional project of the French Republic—suddenly gives our representation of the course of human history a relatively reliable sense of direction. For on the basis of standards we have thereby assumed, we are virtually compelled to see in slavery, in despotic regimes—indeed, every form of the restriction of legal autonomy in general—the victorious stages of a progressive process that points to a future that is to be further morally shaped with our involvement. Thus, the teleological schema that Kant could previously explain only by means of the trick of an intention of nature now becomes the narrative organizational principle of historical self-reassurance in the politically driven process of enlightenment.

To be sure, even this third justificatory model is further subordinated to the premises of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. For otherwise Kant could not justify why the affirmation of the reforming and revolutionary events, for their part, could claim moral legitimacy. But compared with the previously elaborated explanatory approaches, the principles of the moral law play a fundamentally altered role. This is because they are no longer treated solely as timeless and placeless imperatives; rather, they are viewed at the same time as the source of institutional

transformations. Now they also possess, it could perhaps be said, an element of empirical (or historical) reality.²³ In his third model—as though with this first step he were already moving toward Hegel—Kant, with the greatest cautiousness, situated practical reason historically. It is this moderate de-transcendentalization that enables him to conceptualize the hypothesis of progress as the product of a perspectival shift of the historical subject himself or herself. With this step, it could perhaps be said, Kant approaches Hegel's idea of a historical realization of practical reason, but without at the same time assuming Hegel's conclusion that there is an objective teleology of the historical process. Kant is protected from reaching that point by the "hermeneutic" thought that the chaotic multiplicity of history must appear as a directed process of progress only to those individuals who must historically situate themselves in the present context in the interests of political and moral improvement. In the next step, I examine whether any clues supporting this third justificatory model can also be found in the conceptual determinations Kant used to characterize the process of historical progress.



While in his writings on the philosophy of history as a whole Kant paid relatively little attention to grounding the hypothesis of progress, he devoted much more energy and care to the question of how the concrete unfolding of this hypothesis of progress could appropriately be determined. In some passages, it even looks as though this task of a morally inspired reinterpretation of history fascinated him to such an extent that, against the grain of his temperament, he gave free rein to his imagination. Such a speculative loss of inhibition comes to light especially in those writings where Kant undertakes, in agreement with his constructive intention, to uncover the secret plan that is supposed to have been operating behind the historical actions and atrocities of the human species. In such contexts, Kant uses all his power of imagination simply to suggest to us that we recognize even in the most repugnant and objectionable facts of our history the secret intention by which nature has intended our moral progress.

In the writings on the philosophy of history, however, this descriptive model is challenged precisely as much as the two other types of foundation that rely on the idea of an "intention of nature." In fact, in the two essays that avoid making reference to this heuristic construction of our faculty of judgment, a totally different tendency can be discerned, according to which the historical path leading to a better future is described not according to the model of a natural teleology but, rather, as the product of a human learning process. In the rare remarks that Kant dedicated to the alternative model just sketched, he pursues his attempt to "de-transcendentalize" practical reason by situating it historically. This unofficial vantage point, however, which is to a certain extent system-bursting, remains obviously overshadowed by the explicit attempt to reconstruct human history as though it were underpinned by the teleological plan of an intention of nature.

Kant strictly follows the basic idea underlying his first two justificatory models when, throughout large parts of his writings on the philosophy of history, he pursues the aim of

discovering a natural teleology within the confusion of the species' history. In this, he allows himself to be guided by the hypothesis that the means used by nature to educate the human species must have been the mechanism of social conflict. Even if Kant, in marked contrast to Hegel, never showed any signs of an inclination toward social theory, he nevertheless proves in the corresponding passages of his work to be an author with a significant measure of sociological imagination. Depending on the context, however, two separate versions of this assumption can be found in his writings, according to which the medium intended by nature for the perfecting of the human being must have been social antagonism.

The first version, which can be found above all in the essay "Idea for a Universal History," starts from the premise of an "unsocial sociability of the human being,"²⁴ which means that we simultaneously possess a deep-seated desire for social belonging and an equally basic tendency toward individuation.²⁵ As Kant continues, with explicit reliance on Rousseau, it is supposed to follow from this dual nature that human subjects continuously strive for new achievements that would distinguish them from others, and they do so solely in order to find in their "enviously competitive vanity,"²⁶ recognition from the social community. But once humanity sets out on this road of the struggle for distinction, boundaries can no longer be set, according to Kant, for the spiritual development of the species, because the urge to achieve—due to a lack of opportunities—is finally forced to extend even to the increase in our capacity to make ethical judgments. The historical progress in the human being's way of thinking, as we can summarize this first version, is the result of a social struggle for recognition that was forced on us by nature when it endowed us with an "unsocial sociability."²⁷ However, Kant's reflections rely so heavily on Rousseau's critique of civilization—according to which selfishness and vanity are the driving motives behind an intensifying struggle for distinction—that they have little in common with Hegel's concept of a morally motivated conflict.

In the second version we can discern in Kant's model of social conflict, it is war that takes over the role that was played by the struggle for distinction in the first version. The relevant texts here, in particular, are the writings on "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History" and "Perpetual Peace." In both essays, Kant transfers the function responsible for the increase in cultural achievements, which he previously held is owed to the vanity of human beings, to our heightened sense of honor, a sense that, according to him, is kept continuously alert by the constant threat of war.²⁸ Like the desire to distinguish oneself, the need for the community to prove itself in war also incites ever-new cultural achievements, which lead to the "reciprocal promotion" of social well-being and, indeed, even increase the level of the country's freedom.²⁹ Kant clearly encounters difficulties, however, when he tries to draw out the positive implications of such assumptions concerning the internal "blessings" of war—these are, in fact, benefits that war is supposed to have exerted over human morality. For perhaps he might still justifiably demonstrate why the constant threat of war has pushed people historically to be motivated and prepared to make peace, but he certainly can no longer show that this, therefore, must have also been linked with an increased understanding of the universal, or the universally valid, moral law. Such explanatory difficulties might well be why this second version of the model of conflict plays overall only an extremely marginal role in Kant's work. For as long as he entertains the trick of an intention of nature, it is without a doubt the second version that dominates, according to which the struggle for distinction intended by nature forces us to progress in the moralization of our mores and modes of conduct.

Kant's writings on the philosophy of history also sketch another alternative to this approach

one that completely renounces the construction of a natural teleology. Admittedly, the new descriptive model does not quite manage to succeed without the mechanism of social conflict, but it does give it a completely different twist than in the framework that suggests a natural providence. Kant toys with the possibility of such an alternative in all the passages where he considers nature only as the origin of a specific human capacity of the human being and not as the original cause of a plan that concerns us. This is the case in both of the essays already mentioned, as it is in the hermeneutic and the explicative models discussed previously. The starting point of the concept of progress this entails consists in the conviction that not only “unsocial sociability” but also the faculty of free intelligence belongs to the natural capacities of the human being—that is, intelligence bound only to reasons. Nature has endowed us, in contrast to animals, with an “inclination and vocation to think freely.”³⁰ On the ontogenetic level, as Kant shows in his “Pedagogy,”³¹ this faculty of intelligence makes a certain learning process inevitable, because every child, under minimally favorable conditions of socialization, is required to appropriate for himself or herself reasons that are stored up in his or her cultural environment. The child’s reason [*Vernunft*] is formed through the internalization of the social reserve of knowledge that is amassed in the society in which the child grows to maturity with the help of his or her parents or other primary caregivers. If, however, all societies dispose over a certain store of rational knowledge, then one can with good reason infer from this that a certain aptitude for learning can be supposed to exist at the level of the history of the species. For every generation will not merely repeat the process of knowledge acquisition that the previous generation has gone through; rather, it will be able to enrich the heritage it takes up so that overall, in the chain of successive generations, the scope of knowledge is extended in a cumulative manner. Once such a mechanism of learning spanning the generations is presupposed, human history, taken as a whole, could therefore be understood as a cognitive process of progress: indeed, as the unfolding of moral rationalization.

Now, in sketching an alternative descriptive model that does not rely on a natural teleology, Kant is by no means naive enough to ground historical progress on such an ideal picture of collective learning. Rather, since his pretheoretical intuition about human history is, in fact, as I said at the outset, an extremely dark one, it is only logical that he should have included counterforces in his model that threaten to block or interrupt the always-possible anthropological process of the cumulative enhancement of reason. In the two texts that are relevant here, Kant identifies two such complications that must be included in the image of the learning process in order to make it more complete.

First, Kant takes into account the habitual constitution of human nature, which can lead to a situation in which the existing aptitude for intelligence is prevented from coming to fruition through the changing of the generations, thus making a cumulative transfer of knowledge impossible. According to the well-known formulations of his essay “What Is Enlightenment?,” intellectual “laziness” and “cowardice” are the main reasons that “such a large number of [human beings] even when nature has long emancipated them from alien guidance . . . nevertheless gladly remain immature for life.”³² The unfolding of the learning process of the species is historically dependent on structures of character and mentality that mark the members of a given society. The human being’s aptitude for intelligence can therefore demonstrate cumulative effects only when it encounters a social culture that allows the corresponding virtues and modes of behavior to prosper. To this extent, Kant must basically place under the cognitive learning process another, habitual process of education that historically ensures that the type

of sensitivity and models of behavior necessary for the realization of our intellectual aptitudes are also provided.³³ In this context, though, he equally seems to consider the socializing effects of the public use of reason, through which subjects are encouraged in an ever-greater measure to use their understanding autonomously. In contrast to Hegel, who hardly even emphasizes the political and public conditions of our thinking, Kant is deeply convinced that the human beings' capacities for reflection grow the more the individual is put under the pressure of public justification.

Second, Kant takes into account that the obstacle to learning also stands in close relationship with the tendency of human beings to limit themselves—out of the urge to conform or a lack of courage—to conventional thinking. According to this account, the hierarchical structure of all previous societies allows the dominant to maintain the subordinates in a social state that negates all chance of an undistorted, free use of their own faculty of intelligence. The “victors,” to cite Benjamin once more, have at their disposal cultural instruments of power that prevent the lower social classes from advancing along the cognitive learning process. As though in a text by Bertolt Brecht, Kant writes, again in his essay on Enlightenment: “Having first infatuated their domestic animals, and carefully prevented the docile creatures from taking a single step without the leading-strings to which they were tied, they next show them the danger which threatens them if they try to walk unaided.” Throughout the course of human history, intimidation, the threat of violence, and state censorship have been the instruments the powerful have used to prevent the dominated from learning that could have morally undermined their own domination. To this extent, Kant is sociologically realistic enough to see through the blockages that, as a result of the unequal distribution of cultural power, oppose the learning process spanning the generations. This is why the historical realization of reason, which unfolds in the form of a heightening of the faculty of intelligence and rationality, is not a continuous but, rather, a deeply discontinuous process.

At this level, though, Kant also seems to count on an antidote capable of putting back in motion and renewing the learning process that had been halted or interrupted by the instruments of power. If we generalize by a few degrees his idea of the “signs of history” which Kant presents in the second part of his essay “The Contest of the Faculties,” the aforementioned idea now states that moral attainments with universalistic validity necessarily leave traces in social memory. This is because events of such magnitude, which affectively touch on the “interests of humanity,”³⁵ can no longer fall into oblivion with respect to the species' learning capacity. The result is that, like stages or degrees, they mark a progress in the process of a future emancipation of humanity that is irreducible. In memory of these moral “bolts” [*Sperrriegel*] securing the past, says Kant, there will always be people in human history who, “when favorable circumstances present themselves, . . . rise up and make renewed attempts of the same kind as before.”³⁶ Kant's very strong emphasis here on the threshold function of specific events in historical evolution probably has much to do with his focus on the public conditions of the human use of reason. For such occurrences, which signal political and moral progress, establish a level of justification for the entire public that can be disregarded, in the future, only at the cost of public exposure.

To be sure, a satisfactory model of historical progress cannot be constructed from these fragments of an alternative explanatory model in Kant's writings. However, his few remarks perhaps allow us plausibly to claim that Kant, in the unofficial part of his philosophy of history

counts on a process toward the better, one that takes the shape of learning process that repeatedly violently interrupted but that can never be fully halted. The idea of such a conflict-ridden learning process admittedly only suits the foundation of historical progress that Kant offered in his hermeneutic and explicative model. For the civilizational and moral improvements on the basis of which the idea of human capacity of learning is developed can in no way be thought of, even hypothetically, as the results of a natural intention. Rather, they can only be thought as the work of the united efforts of human subjects. Kant therefore assumes, just like Hegel, a teleology of directed progress, but he does not deliver it over to the anonymous process of an unfolding of spirit. Instead, he takes this teleology as a construction that subjects acting in the sense of enlightenment must achieve in order to gain clear consciousness of the historical place of their own projects. The combination of these two system-bursting elements thus leads to the consequence that the thought of a learning process spanning generations must be understood as a construction that necessarily shapes the historical self-understanding of the supporters of the Enlightenment. All those who actively side with the moral achievements of the Enlightenment are thus forced to see the history preceding them as a conflict-ridden learning process, which, as heirs of this process, they have to continue in their own time. In all probability, such a hermeneutic reduction of the idea of progress represents the only possibility for making Kant's philosophy of history fruitful for the present.

Translated by Robert Sinnerbrink and Jean-Philippe Deranty

A SOCIAL PATHOLOGY OF REASON

On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory

With the turn of the new century, Critical Theory appears to have become an intellectual artifact. This superficial dividing point alone seems to greatly increase the intellectual gap separating us from the theoretical beginnings of the Frankfurt School. Just as the names of authors who were for its founders still vividly alive suddenly sound as if they come from far away, so, too, the theoretical challenges from which the members of the school had won their insights threaten to fall into oblivion. Today a younger generation carries on the work of social criticism without having much more than a nostalgic memory of the heroic years of Western Marxism. Indeed, the last time the writings of Herbert Marcuse and Max Horkheimer were read as contemporary works already lies over thirty years in the past. There is an atmosphere of the outdated and antiquated, of the irretrievably lost, which surrounds the grand historical and philosophical ideas of Critical Theory, ideas for which there no longer seems to be any kind of resonance within the experience of the accelerating present. The great chasm that separates us from our predecessors must be comparable to that which separated the first generation of the telephone and movie theater from the last representatives of German Idealism. The same irritated astonishment with which Walter Benjamin or Siegfried Kracauer may have looked at the photo of the late Friedrich Schelling must today overcome a young student who, on her computer, stumbles across a photo of the young Horkheimer, posing in a bourgeois Wilhelmine interior.

However much the traces of lost experiences are reflected in the physiognomy of now forgotten faces, so much greater are the presuppositions of the past age reflected in its intellectual premises and constructions. Critical Theory, whose intellectual horizon was decisively formed in the appropriation of European intellectual history from Hegel to Freud, still relies on the possibility of viewing history with reason as its guiding thread. But there may be no other aspect of Critical Theory more foreign to today's generation, which has grown unconsciously of cultural plurality and of the end of "grand narratives," than social criticism founded on this sort of philosophy of history. The idea of a historically effective reason, which all the representatives of the Frankfurt School from Horkheimer to Jürgen Habermas firmly endorsed, will be incomprehensible if one can no longer recognize the unity of a single rationality in the diversity of established convictions. And the more far-reaching idea that the progress of reason is blocked or interrupted by the capitalistic organization of society will only trigger astonishment, since capitalism can no longer be seen as a unified system of social reason. Though thirty-five years ago, starting from the idea of an "emancipatory interest," Habermas once again tried to ground the idea of emancipation from control and oppression in the history of the species, today he concedes that "such a form of argumentation belongs 'unambiguously' to the past."¹

The political changes of the past several decades have not been without influence on the

status of social criticism. Consciousness of a plurality of cultures and the experience of variety of different social emancipation movements have significantly lowered expectations what criticism ought to be and should be capable of. Generally speaking, there is prevalent today a liberal conception of justice that uses criteria for the normative identification of social injustice without the desire to further explicate the institutional framework of injustice by embedding it within a particular type of society. Where such a procedure is felt to be insufficient, appeals are made to models of social criticism that are constructed in the spirit of Michel Foucault's genealogical method or in the style of Michael Walzer's critical hermeneutics.² In all these cases, however, criticism is understood as nothing more than a reflective form of rationality that is supposed to be anchored in the historical process itself.

Critical Theory, in contrast—and in a way that may be unique to it—insists on a mediation of theory and history in a concept of socially effective rationality. That is, the historical process should be understood from a practical point of view: as a process of development whose pathological deformation by capitalism may be overcome only by initiating a process of enlightenment among those involved. It is this working model of the intertwining of theory and history that grounds the unity of Critical Theory, despite its variety of voices. Whether in its positive form with the early Horkheimer, Marcuse, or Habermas or in its negative form with Theodor Adorno or Benjamin, one finds the same idea forming the background of each of the different projects—namely, that social relationships distort the historical process of development in a way that one can only practically remedy. Designating the legacy of Critical Theory for the new century would necessarily involve recovering from the idea of a social pathology of reason an explosive charge that can still be touched off today. Against the tendency to reduce social criticism to a project of normative, situational, or local opinion, one must clarify the context in which social criticism stands side by side with the demands of historically evolved reason.

In what follows, I take a first step in that direction. First, I detail the ethical core contained in Critical Theory's idea of a socially deficient rationality. Second, I outline how capitalism can be understood as a cause of such a deformation of social rationality. Third and last, I establish the connection of practice to the goal of overcoming the social suffering caused by deficient rationality. Each of these three stages involves finding a new language that can make clear in present terms what Critical Theory intended in the past. Still, I often have to content myself here merely with suggesting lines of thought that would have to be pursued to bring the arguments of earlier Critical Theory up to date.



Even if it may be difficult to discover a systematic unity in the many forms of Critical Theory, taking the notion of the negativity of social theory as our point of departure will serve us well in establishing a first point of common interest.³ Not only the members of the inner circle but also those on the periphery of the Institute for Social Research perceive the societal situation on which they want to have an effect as being in a state of social negativity.⁴ Moreover, there

is widespread agreement that the concept of negativity should not be restricted in a narrow way to offences committed against principles of social justice but, rather, should be extended more broadly to violations of the conditions for a good or successful life.⁵ All of the expressions that the members of the circle use to characterize the given state of society arise from a social-theoretical vocabulary grounded in the basic distinction between “pathological” and “intact, nonpathological” relations. Horkheimer first speaks of the “irrational organization of society; Adorno speaks later of the “administered world”; Marcuse uses such concepts as “one-dimensional society” and “repressive tolerance”; and Habermas, finally, uses the formula of the “colonization of the social life-world.”⁶

Such formulations always normatively presuppose an “intact” state of social relations in which all the members are provided an opportunity for successful self-actualization. But what is specifically meant by this terminology is not sufficiently explained by merely pointing out the fact that it contrasts with the language of social injustice in moral philosophy. Rather, the distinctiveness of the expressions only becomes manifest when the obscure connection taken to exist between the social pathology and defective rationality comes to light. All the authors mentioned above assume that the cause of the negative state of society is to be found in a deficit in social rationality. They maintain an internal connection between pathological relationships and the condition of social rationality, which explains their interest in the historical process of the actualization of reason. Any attempt to make the tradition of Critical Theory fruitful for the present must thus begin with the task of bringing this conceptual connection up to date, one grounded in an ethical idea whose roots are in the philosophy of Hegel.

The thesis that social pathologies are to be understood as a result of deficient rationality is ultimately indebted to Hegel’s political philosophy. He begins his *Philosophy of Right* with the supposition that a vast number of trends toward a loss of meaning manifested themselves in his time, tendencies that could be explained only by the insufficient appropriation of a “objectively” already possible reason.⁷ The assumption behind Hegel’s diagnosis of his own time lies in a comprehensive conception of reason in which he establishes a connection between historical progress and ethics. Reason unfolds in the historical process by re-creating universal “ethical” institutions at each new stage; by taking these institutions into account, individuals are able to design their lives according to socially acknowledged aims and thus to experience life as meaningful. Whoever does not let such objective ends of reason influence his or her life will suffer from the consequences of “indeterminacy” and will develop symptoms of disorientation. If one transports this ethical insight into the framework of the social processes of an entire society, Hegel’s diagnosis of his time basic to his *Philosophy of Right* emerges in outline form. Hegel saw the outbreak of dominant systems of thought and ideologies in his own society that, by preventing subjects from perceiving an ethical life that was already established, gave rise to widespread symptoms of the loss of meaning. In light of this diagnosis, Hegel was convinced that social pathologies were to be understood as the result of the inability of society to properly express the rational potential already inherent in its institutions, practices, and everyday routines.

When this view is detached from the particular context in which it is embedded in Hegel, it amounts to the general thesis that each successful form of society is possible only through the maintenance of its most highly developed standard of rationality. According to Hegel, the claimed connection is justified on the basis of the ethical premise that it is only each instance of the rational universal that can provide the members of society with the orientating

according to which they can meaningfully direct their lives. And this fundamental conviction must still be at work, when, despite their different approaches, critical theorists all claim that it is a lack of social rationality that causes the pathology of capitalist society. Without this ethical assumption, already found implicitly in Hegel, one cannot justify establishing such a connection. The members of society must agree that leading a successful, undistorted life together is only possible if they all orient themselves according to principles or institutions that they can understand as rational ends for self-actualization. Any deviation from the ideal outlined here must lead to a social pathology insofar as subjects are recognizably suffering from a loss of universal, communal ends.

Nevertheless, this ethical core of the initial hypothesis, common to the various projects of Critical Theory, remains for the most part overlaid by anthropological premises. The rational universal that is supposed to vouchsafe an “intact” form of social life is understood as the potential for an invariant mode of human activity. Horkheimer’s thought contains such an element in his conception of work, according to which the human mastery of nature is directed “immanently” toward the goal of a social condition in which individual contributions transparently and mutually complement one another.⁸ One might then say with Marx that the emergence of social pathology depends on the fact that the actual organization of society falls short of the standards of rationality that are already embodied in the forces of production. In the case of Marcuse, the authority of a rational universal is shifted increasingly in his later writings to the sphere of aesthetic practice, which appears as the medium of social integration in which subjects can satisfy their social needs in noncoerced cooperation.⁹ Here, then, the social pathology sets in at that moment in which the organization of society begins to suppress the rational potential that is at home in the power of the imagination anchored in the lifeworld. Finally, Habermas secures the Hegelian idea of a rational universal by means of the concept of communicative agreement, whose idealizing presuppositions are supposed to meet the concern that the potential of discursive rationality regains universal acceptance at every new stage of social development. We can speak therefore of a social pathology as soon as the symbolic reproduction of society is no longer subjected to those standards of rationality which are inherent in the most highly developed form of linguistic understanding.¹⁰

In all these approaches to Critical Theory, the same Hegelian idea—namely, that a rational universal is always required for the possibility of fulfilled self-actualization within society—continually incorporated, only in different characterizations of the original human practice of action. Just as with Horkheimer’s concept of human work or with Marcuse’s idea of an aesthetic life, Habermas’s concept of communicative understanding above all serves the aim of fixing the form of reason whose developed shape provides the medium for both a rational and a satisfying integration of society. It is with reference to such an authority of rational practice that critical theorists can analyze society according to a theory of reason qua diagnosis of social pathologies. Deviations from the ideal that would be achieved with the social actualization of the rational universal can be described as social pathologies since they must accompany a regrettable loss of prospects for intersubjective self-actualization.

In the path of intellectual development from Horkheimer to Habermas the idea of universal rationality changed, of course, not only in regard to its content but also in regard to its methodological form. While Horkheimer combines with his concept of work the notion of a rational potential that is to serve subjects directly as an aim of cooperative self-actualization, a “community of free human beings,”¹¹ Habermas understands the idea of communicative

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