

INTRODUCTION TO *THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL THEORY**

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The critical theory of the Frankfurt School has exercised a major influence on debates within Marxism and the philosophy of science over the past fifty years. Starting with the work of the School's early members such as Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse,¹ many of its central themes have more recently been developed and reconstructed in the writings of Jürgen Habermas.² Like his predecessors, Habermas has aimed at articulating the distinctive epistemological character of a kind of social theory supposedly represented in much of Marx's work: social theory as critique. A critical social theory, it is argued, differs significantly both from the positivist conception of social science, and from the main historical alternative to this, the hermeneutic or interpretive tradition.³

This book is an attempt to evaluate the claims made for a critical social theory by the Frankfurt School, and in particular by Habermas. So I will begin by giving a fairly schematic account of how critical theorists have characterized the nature of such a theory, and follow this with an outline of the main elements in Habermas's position that I will be examining later. But these are not intended to represent all the major areas of his or other critical theorists' work. My focus is deliberately restricted to certain epistemological and ontological issues about social theory and its relationship to political practice. So I shall not, for instance, consider the substantive merits of Habermas's analysis of the crisis-potentials in late capitalist societies, or of his studies on the developmental logic of normative structures.⁴

Critical theorists' conception of a critical social theory can best be understood by outlining their attitude towards the positivist and hermeneutic alternatives.⁵ The former is taken to involve a belief in the possibility of a scientific investigation of social phenomena which shares its epistemological status with that of natural science, regarded as the paradigmatic example of human knowledge. Such a science aims at the discovery of universal laws, which enable us to predict and control physical and

* [2013] Published as the Introduction to *The Politics of Social Theory: Habermas, Freud and the Critique of Positivism*, Basil Blackwell/University of Chicago Press 1981, pp. 1-11; citations should be to this. No changes have been made to the original text, apart from typographical corrections and the addition of bibliographical information. References in the text to other chapters in the book have been retained: chapter 2 ('Value-Freedom and Socialist Theory'), chapter 3 ('Knowledge, Objects and Interests'), chapter 4 ('Psychoanalysis and Human Emancipation'), and chapter 5 ('Theory and Practice in Psychotherapy'), are also available at www.russellkeat.net; so, too, is an earlier version of chapter 1 ('The Critique of Positivism').

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social processes. The truth or falsity of scientific theories depends exclusively upon their logical relationships to the empirical data provided through observation. No other criteria are relevant. In particular, scientific practice must be governed by the requirement of objectivity, of freedom from the distortions that result from the intrusion of moral or political values into science.

For positivists, normative issues are quite distinct from scientific ones, and are relevant only to decisions about how scientific knowledge is to be used. Science itself can only establish conditional predictions about the consequences of possible courses of action, but cannot justify the goals of such actions. Scientific knowledge is, in itself, politically and morally neutral. It is this claim which is the central target for critical theorists' critique of positivism. Against it they argue that the kind of practice that can be guided by a positivist social science has a specific and politically unacceptable character. Scientific knowledge, positivistically conceived, is inherently repressive, and contributes to the maintenance of a form of society in which science is one of the resources employed for the domination of one class by another, and in which the possibilities for a radical transformation towards a more rational society are blocked and concealed.

Why is it that a positivist social science is thought to have these political consequences? The attempt to formulate universal laws governing social phenomena leads to the misrepresentation as eternal or natural of what should instead be seen as historically specific and alterable. Positivism thus reinforces the reified and alienated character of (especially capitalist) social structures. Its conception of the relationship between theory and practice makes scientific knowledge necessarily manipulative, the ideal basis for a system of social control exercised by a dominant class, which can present itself as making political decisions in a purely rational, scientific manner. And by defining reason in this narrowly instrumental way, positivism undermines the intelligibility of any critique of society from the standpoint of a different conception of reason that is grounded in the human capacity for self-reflective autonomy and emancipation.

It is from this standpoint that a critical social theory is constructed, designed so as to become part of a self-reflective movement towards a more rational society. Thus critical social theory is itself to be one element contributing towards that transformation. It is therefore concerned with identifying the present possibilities for radical change towards a society in which human beings exercise fully their capacity for self-conscious control over social processes, and in which there is an absence of dominative power relationships and ideological consciousness. So the critique of existing ideologies and ideologically informed practices, such as positivist social science itself, is an important feature of critical social theory. But this critique is not purely 'theoretical': it must also specify and motivate the kinds of political action that will realize its emancipatory goal.

This conception of social theory differs too from the hermeneutic alternative to positivism. According to this, the central aim in the study of social reality is not the explanation and prediction of observable phenomena, but the interpretive understanding of meanings. Often taking the interpretation of texts as their model, hermeneutic theorists emphasize the significance of language or communicative interaction as the primary feature of the 'objects' of social theory, which thus distinguishes them from the objects of the natural sciences. Social reality is seen to consist in rule-governed, meaningful activity; and the understanding of this must involve an implicit dialogue between theorist and theorized, since the way in which the latter conceive of their own activities is itself a central part of social reality, unlike the situation in the natural sciences. Thus the criteria of validity for a hermeneutic social theory are distinct from those proposed by positivists, who mistakenly believe in the methodological unity of the sciences.

For critical theorists, however, a hermeneutic social theory is also unacceptable. Through its exclusive concern with the self-understandings of social agents it is unable to identify the existence of self-misunderstanding, of ideological consciousness. Nor can it recognize the significance of structural features of society that operate as unconscious determinants of social phenomena. Its non-critical attitude towards dominant forms of consciousness and practice conceals the way these function to maintain systematic a-symmetries of power and control. Thus interpretive social theory in effect views its objects as if they had already achieved what should instead be regarded as an as yet unrealized historical project: a society free from ideology and domination. It is this project towards which a critical social theory must be directed. And its own criteria of validity must therefore differ from those of either positivist or hermeneutic science. They must be tied to the successful outcome of social practices that are themselves partly guided by this kind of theory, and where success is defined by reference to the aim of human emancipation.

This completes my general sketch of critical theorists' views about the nature of social theory. I have made no attempt to do justice to the subtleties of formulation and argument in the writings of its major proponents, or to the important divergences between them. But this will be partly remedied by now giving a preliminary outline of Habermas's position which is, I believe, the most sophisticated and plausible development of these views.

Habermas's conception of critical social theory is articulated in the context of an overall critique of positivism which, he says,

stands or falls with the principle of scientism, that is that the meaning of knowledge is defined by what the sciences do and can thus be explicated through the methodological analysis of

scientific procedures.⁶

In place of positivism, Habermas proposes the differentiation of three forms of knowledge, of which only one, 'empirical-analytic science', represents the kind that positivists have presented as definitive of all genuine knowledge. But his analysis of empirical-analytic knowledge itself challenges the positivist conception of science as 'objective', in the sense of being both value- or interest-free, and descriptive of a subject-independent reality. Instead, Habermas argues that empirical-analytic science is constituted by, and thus presupposes, a specific human interest, the 'technical' interest. It is because of this that the theories of empirical-analytic science can, and can only, be utilized in a specific form of practice which is by no means normatively neutral, namely the instrumental control of natural or social processes.

In precisely what sense is the technical interest 'constitutive'? Habermas claims that it constitutes both the object-domain of empirical-analytic science, and the criteria of validity appropriate to assessing statements about that object-domain. The technical interest determines 'the objectivity of possible objects of experience',⁷ i.e. what basic kinds of characteristics the 'object' must have, for such a science; and this object-domain consists of 'moving bodies', of 'things, events, and conditions which are, in principle, capable of being manipulated'.⁸ The criteria of validity for claims about such objects are those of hypothetico-deductive theory-testing in experimentally reproducible conditions.

Though Habermas's conception of object-constitution is partly Kantian, he differs from Kant in at least one major respect. He argues that the necessary features of these objects of empirical-analytic science cannot be derived by transcendental arguments establishing the conditions for the possibility of knowledge for any knowing subject, but instead must be seen to result from a particular interest of the human species that is grounded in a species-universal characteristic: labour, involving instrumental feedback-controlled activity.

The two other forms of knowledge – 'historical-hermeneutic' and 'self-reflective' – are analysed by Habermas in a similar fashion, in terms of constitutive interests, species-universal characteristics, and their related object-domains and criteria of validity. Thus, in the case of hermeneutic knowledge, the object-domain consists of 'speaking and acting subjects', 'persons, utterances and conditions which in principle are structured and to be understood symbolically';⁹ and its criteria of validity involve agreement upon meanings between partners in a (possibly imaginary) situation of dialogue. Its constitutive interest, the 'practical' interest, is that of successful communication, and is grounded in the human species-universal characteristic of language. It is this interest which determines the nature of hermeneutic theories' practical application, the restoration of communicative understanding

between or within various groups or individuals.

Self-reflective knowledge (to which category belongs critical social theory) differs from both empirical and hermeneutic knowledge, though it involves elements that have parallels with each. Its object-domain can be seen as consisting of actions and utterances that are, in a sense to be specified further, defective or distorted. Their defective character is such that they bear some resemblance to the objects of empirical-analytic science, and may indeed often be misidentified as belonging to this domain; for they are subject to quasi-causal determinants, ‘the causality of fate’,¹⁰ and cannot be understood by the interpretive procedures of hermeneutic theories. Instead they require what Habermas calls ‘explanatory understanding’,¹¹ which is neither purely causal, nor purely interpretive.

The constitutive interest of this form of knowledge, the ‘emancipatory’ interest, aims at the realization of autonomy through the freeing of distorted communicative activities from their quasi-causal determinants. Its criteria of validity include the successful outcome of self-reflective processes by human subjects, aided by their use of the insights provided by a critical social theory. Thus – though Habermas does not explicitly put it this way – the aim of a critical theory is, in effect, the abolition of its own object-domain, the transformation of defective actions and utterances into non-defective ones. I think it follows from this that, with the success of emancipatory knowledge, all actions and utterances will belong fully to the object-domain of hermeneutic knowledge, and (at least some forms of) self-reflective knowledge will become redundant.

In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas presents his conception of critical social theory through an analysis of the epistemological status of psychoanalysis, focusing especially on the relationship between the explanatory theory and the character of the therapeutic interaction between analyst and patient. Thus, at the outset of his discussion of Freud, Habermas announces that ‘Psychoanalysis is relevant to us as the only tangible example of a science incorporating methodical self-reflection’.¹²

Freud himself, he notes, regarded his theory as empirical-analytic; but Habermas argues that this is a scientific self-misunderstanding, indeed one that introduced certain misguided elements into Freud’s own work, particularly the attempt to conceptualize psychological processes in ways expressing his belief that one day psychoanalytic theory would be provided with a neurophysiological reduction. But Habermas also rejects what has been the main alternative to this positivist view of psychoanalytic theory’s epistemological status, a purely hermeneutic one. This, he believes, cannot account for the significance in Freud’s theoretical and therapeutic standpoint of the distortions of human activity resulting from the operation of unconscious, repressed, forces. To understand these requires a ‘depth

hermeneutics', providing explanatory understanding.

It will be helpful at this point to give a brief account of Habermas's interpretation of psychoanalysis; particularly as I will later be following Habermas's lead in analysing the epistemological character of critical social theory by examining the relationships between psychotherapeutic theories and practices. But it should be noted that this focus upon psychotherapy does not indicate, either for Habermas or for me, that critical social theory must be exclusively psychotherapeutic in its substantive content; nor that a political practice guided by such a theory must involve some form of personal politics based upon psychotherapeutic theories or techniques. Habermas's concern with Freudian theory in this part of *Knowledge and Human Interests* is primarily epistemological, and this is how I will be presenting and assessing it.

Habermas examines three main elements in psychoanalytic theory: the structural model of ego, id, and super-ego; the theory of dream formation and interpretation; and the theory of psychosexual development, which specifies the relationships between childhood experiences and the characteristics of adults, including the sources of neurosis. In each case he argues that both the meanings of the theoretical claims and their criteria of validation must be understood by reference to the nature of the therapeutic situation, which involves a self-reflective process on the part of the patient, leading to emancipation from the quasi-causal power of the unconscious determinants of distorted actions and utterances. He thus wishes to reject a scientific understanding of the relationship between theory and practice in psychoanalysis, according to which psychoanalytic theory is supported by empirical evidence derived from both clinical and experimental contexts, and can guide therapeutic practice by providing conditional predictions about the likely outcomes of the manipulation of causal variables in the interactions between analyst and patient.

Against this picture Habermas claims, for instance, that although the theory of psychosexual development can be used by the analyst to suggest interpretations of a patient's neurotic activity, the truth or falsity of these is not determinable in the manner appropriate to the hypotheses of an empirical-analytic science. But neither can they be assessed by the criteria appropriate to ordinary forms of hermeneutic interpretation, since the meaning of the patient's activity is at least temporarily concealed by the disguised character of unconscious wishes. The distorted communications of neurosis have to be deciphered by the kinds of procedures used by Freud for the interpretation of dreams. Through this process the power of the repressed unconscious is overcome, and the patient moves self-reflectively towards emancipation. And for Habermas this is to be seen as a movement from the realm of necessity to that of freedom.

So far, this account of Habermas's position has been drawn almost entirely from *Knowledge and Human Interests*. But there are certain features of some of his later writings which should also be noted here. In particular, the concept of distorted communication has been developed in the form of a 'theory of communicative competence' and a 'universal pragmatics', in which, amongst other things, an attempt is made to specify a number of norms presupposed by all communicative activity, such as truth and sincerity. On this basis, one can identify systematically the various kinds of possible distortions to which such activity may be subject.¹³ Further, Habermas argues that the realization of these norms requires the existence of an 'ideal speech situation' which is marked by the absence of internal and external sources of coercion. And he makes use of this concept to construct both a theory of truth, and a theory of the rational foundation for the normative judgments involved in the 'practical discourse' of ethics and politics. What is true, and what is right, are defined in terms of the consensus potentially achieved by participants in this speech situation, where there are no a-symmetries of power between them, and where they are motivated solely by 'the unforced force of the better argument'.¹⁴

These, then, are the main elements in Habermas's position that will be examined in the following chapters. Before describing the various issues and claims that will be presented there, I will give some indication of my overall view of critical theorists' conception of the nature of social theory and its relation to politics. I share their opposition to positivism's identification of human knowledge with empirical science, to a positivist social science, and to the idea and practice of a scientific politics. But I believe there are important errors in their analysis of positivism which lead them to adopt an unacceptable view of the distinctive criteria of validity for a critical social theory. In particular, whilst sympathetic to the project of a social theory which, guided by certain values, is aimed at contributing towards the transformation of social reality, I think it is a mistake to tie the assessment of the scientific claims made by such a theory to the successful realization of those values. Further, although generally supporting the ideals of autonomy and self-reflection, I reject the view that these are to be seen as freeing human activity from the realm of causality; and I also reject the associated ontological dichotomy between humans and nature implicit in critical theory. Finally, I do not believe that the normative concepts relied upon by critical theorists, such as autonomy or emancipation, and their supposed antitheses, such as domination or control, are adequate for an understanding of the political and moral complexities of social practice.

The starting point for an assessment of critical theory must be an examination of its critique of positivism. The first two chapters are devoted to this. In them I argue that there are a number of logically distinct elements in what critical theorists have called 'positivism'. In particular, I suggest that the doctrine of value-freedom should be seen not as part and parcel of a unified positivist standpoint, but instead as an important basis for the criticism of certain other 'positivist' doctrines, especially the scientization of politics. I argue also that this doctrine, properly understood, is

compatible with the construction of theories that are in various ways ‘critical’ of social reality, and I defend the relationship between science and values involved in this doctrine against the claim that it entails reformist or moralistic forms of political practice.

In the remaining four chapters I turn specifically to Habermas’s position. I begin, in chapter 3, by criticizing his theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, arguing that he is mistaken in believing that the object-domain and criteria of validity of empirical-analytic science are constituted by a technical interest. I suggest also that this theory involves an unacceptable dichotomy between nature and humans, which both conceals the diversity of different kinds of ‘natural beings’, especially organic ones, and in effect ‘de-naturalizes’ human beings by defining them exclusively in terms of their species-distinctive features, especially language.

Further aspects of this dichotomy are examined and criticized in chapter 4, where I begin a discussion of

Habermas’s use of psychoanalysis as a model for critical social theory. I argue against his attempt to eliminate a biological conception of the instincts from psychoanalytic theory, which is reflected in his misunderstanding of Freud’s concept of the id. I also defend the possibility of a neurophysiological reduction of psychoanalysis and suggest that this is compatible with the characterization of therapeutic processes as emancipatory, provided that one rejects Habermas’s view that such processes involve a movement from the realm of causality. So I try to show how his concept of autonomy can be reconstructed within a deterministic framework.

In chapter 5 the relationship between the truth of psychoanalytic theory and the success of therapeutic practice based upon it is examined. I argue that Habermas’s account of this is mistaken, and relies upon an oversimplified view of the logic of theory-testing in the natural sciences. In the course of this argument I also criticize Popper’s attack on the scientific status of psychoanalytic theory, and Fay’s attempt to show the distinctive way in which a critical social theory is related to the outcome of political practice. More generally, I emphasize the degree of logical independence that exists between the truth of theories and the effectiveness of therapeutic techniques, whilst also arguing that judgments about effectiveness presuppose normative decisions about therapeutic goals.

This theme of the normative elements in psychotherapeutic practices is continued in chapter 6. I suggest that the moral and political concepts of critical theory, and in particular Habermas’s depiction of psychoanalysis as a self-reflective process aiming at autonomy, provide an inadequate basis for understanding the normative complexity of such practices. I then go on to argue that his attempt to provide a rational foundation for normative judgments is unsuccessful, partly by indicating certain problems in his theory of truth as consensus in an ideal speech situation, and partly by examining

various parallels between his position and Rawls's theory of justice, pointing to difficulties facing both of these.

Finally, an explanation of my use of the phrases 'critical theory' and 'critical social theory' may be helpful. I use the latter to refer to any substantive theory about a 'social' object-domain, which is in some way constructed from a 'critical' standpoint. Psychological and economic theories, as well as sociological ones, thus potentially belong to this category. By contrast, I use 'critical theory' to refer to the (broadly) epistemological views characteristic of the Frankfurt School and its supporters, which involve claims about, for instance, the defects of positivism and positivist social science, and the proper character of the relationships between social theory and practice. Thus, according to my use of the terms, 'critical theorists' (amongst other things) advocate the construction of 'critical social theories'.

Notes and references

In all quotations in the main text, the square brackets denote comments, explications, etc., added by the present author.

1 See, e.g. M. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* (trans. M. O'Connell et al, Herder and Herder 1972); H. Marcuse, *Negations* (Allen Lane 1968) and *Reason and Revolution* (2nd edn, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1955). A good account of the early period of the School is M. Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, Little, Brown and Co. 1973.

2 For an excellent critical presentation of the whole range of Habermas's writings, see T. McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas*, Hutchinson 1978. References to particular works by Habermas will be given as they are discussed later.

3 A useful guide to this tradition is W. Outhwaite, *Understanding Social Life*, Allen and Unwin 1975. On positivist social science, see R. Keat and J. Urry, *Social Theory as Science*, Routledge 1975; T. Benton, *Philosophical Foundations of the Three Sociologies*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1977, and R. Keat, 'Positivism and Statistics in Social Science', in J. Irvine, I. Miles and J. Evans eds, *Demystifying Social Statistics*, Pluto Press 1979, pp. 78-86.

4 See, respectively, J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. T. McCarthy, Beacon Press 1975, and J. Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy, Heinemann 1979

5 What follows is strongly influenced by the account of critical social theory in B. Fay, *Social Theory and Political Practice*, Allen and Unwin 1975.

6 J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (trans. J. J. Shapiro, Heinemann 1972), p.67.

7 Ibid., p.36.

8 J. Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (trans. J. Viertel, Heinemann 1974), p.8.

9 Ibid., p.8.

10 Habermas, *Human Interests*, p.271.

11 Ibid., p.272.

12 Ibid., p.214.

13 See especially J. Habermas, 'On Systematically Distorted Communication', *Inquiry* 13, 1970, pp. 205-218; 'Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence', *Inquiry* 13, 1970, pp. 360-75; and 'What is Universal Pragmatics?', in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, pp. 1-68.

14 See McCarthy, *Habermas*, ch. 4. for a discussion of these areas of Habermas's work, and the relevant references.