

For Thomas and Amy

The Politics of Social Theory

Habermas, Freud and the Critique of Positivism

Russell Keat

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Contents

PREFACE	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	x
INTRODUCTION	1
1 THE CRITIQUE OF POSITIVISM	12
1 A paradox in critical theorists' critique of positivism	12
2 Positivism: the one or the many?	15
3 How not to criticize positivism	22
4 The histories of positivism	28
5 The critique of positivism: a preliminary assessment	35
2 VALUE-FREEDOM AND SOCIALIST THEORY	38
1 The logical independence of scientific criteria of validity from normative judgments	38
2 Can normative judgments be derived from social theories?	43
3 The concept of significance in social theory	52
4 Socialist practice and the separation of science and values	58
3 KNOWLEDGE, OBJECTS AND INTERESTS	66
1 Deductive-nomological explanation and the technical interest	67
2 Habermas's interest-constitution theory and instrumentalism	73
3 Criticism of Habermas's interest- constitution theory	78
4 Humans, nature and human nature	87

4	PSYCHOANALYSIS AND HUMAN EMANCIPATION	94
1	The id: alienated ego or home of the instincts?	95
2	The psychoanalytic goal: abolition of the unconscious or strengthening of the ego?	103
3	Autonomy, causality and compulsiveness	109
4	The reduction of psychology to neuro-physiology	118
5	Freud's neurological energy model	128
5	THEORY AND PRACTICE IN PSYCHOTHERAPY	133
1	Psychoanalytic theory as 'science': problems of theory-testing	135
2	The criteria of validity for general interpretations	144
3	Theory and practice: the place of self-fulfilling predictions	152
4	Theory, technique and theory of technique	159
6	THE COMPLEXITY OF NORMS IN PRACTICE	168
1	The politics of psychotherapy	168
2	Communication, truth and the ideal speech-situation	180
3	The rationality of practical discourse	190
	CONCLUSION	199
	NOTES	209
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	224
	INDEX	235

Preface

Prefaces are for confessions and thanks, so I will do both. I became interested in Habermas's *Knowledge and Human Interests* whilst working with John Urry on our *Social Theory as Science*. Soon afterwards I spent a lot of time trying to sort out what Habermas was saying, partly through many long discussions with Linda Nicholson. My biggest thanks are to her. After the struggle for comprehension came near-conversion, followed soon by doubts. This book registers them fully, but I hope also sympathetically and constructively. Trying to come to terms with Habermas's work has been, as they say, a rewarding experience. And it was helped a lot by the publication of Brian Fay's *Social Theory and Political Practice*. Here was someone who amongst other things had succeeded in translating many of the central themes in Habermas's writings into the language of analytical philosophy, in which I continue to feel most at home. It was by using Fay's book in teaching that I began to work out more systematically where I agreed and disagreed with this conception of critical social theory, aided by the contributions of several students, especially John O'Neill.

For me, the centrepiece of *Knowledge and Human Interests* is the discussion of Freud. I had already been interested in psychoanalytic theory, mainly in the context of debates about its scientific status, and had come to think that it could best be understood, epistemologically, in terms of the theoretical realism presented in *Social Theory as Science*. I later became involved as a participant in various therapeutic groups, and it is partly through those encounters that my attitude towards Habermas's interpretation of psychoanalytic theory has emerged, one which is sceptical of the kind of unity he maintains between epistemology, theory, values, and therapeutic techniques. Further, both philo-

sophical and personal reflection suggested a more physiological, somatic view of human existence than he seemed to adopt; but I have found it difficult to provide much in the way of a philosophical articulation of this.

Towards the end of *Social Theory as Science* we posed the question of how far the Frankfurt School's view of social theory departed from Weber's account of the place of political and moral values in social science. In effect, much of what follows can be seen to offer a view of critical social theory that stays quite close to Weber's position. I have always liked Weber's work, especially *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and the essays in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. I suppose I became attached to Weber before becoming attracted to Marx, and have ever since been intellectually and politically embarrassed by this. For Weber, people say, is a bourgeois theorist; and worse still, his bourgeois commitment is most clearly expressed in his doctrine of value-freedom. I have always felt there was something wrong with this accusation, and wanted to be both Weberian and socialist. And since it is possible to hold beliefs that may in fact be incompatible, I seem to have succeeded.

The title of this book was at one time to have been 'Epistemology and Politics', which at least had the virtue of indicating its contents. What it says is that there is little if any connection between the two; or anyway, that the kinds of connections that critical theorists of the Frankfurt School have said there are, do not exist. But they are not the only Marxist (or neo-Marxist) writers who have maintained the existence of such links; it seems to me an almost obsessional feature of a lot of contemporary 'Left' theoretical work, and one that has tended to operate as a substitute for both substantive theoretical analyses of late capitalist societies, and a sustained normative critique of them. What we have often had instead is a form of 'ideology-critique' that attacks everything in sight (and not in sight) for its failure to be 'scientific' in the manner supposedly displayed by the texts of Marx (and often Freud). Not that epistemology is unimportant; but it should not displace social theory and politics.

Finally, some more thanks. To my colleagues in the Philosophy Department for their responses to numerous seminar papers on Habermas over the past few years, and especially Michael Hammond, with whom almost everything in this book (and a lot more) has been discussed; to the participants in meetings organized by the Radical Philosophy Group in Bristol, Oxford, Sussex and London; to Roy Edgley and Carolyn Stone, for their comments on drafts of various chapters; to the British Sociological Association, for the opportunity of giving a version of chapter 1 as a paper at its 1980 conference in Lancaster; and to Margaret Gudgin, Wendy Höpfl, and Ivy Thexton for typing it all more than once.

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Introduction

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

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Where there is more than one work by the same author, these are listed in alphabetical order by titles.

Since several of Freud's works are now available in the Penguin Freud Library, as well as the Standard Edition, I have used the former for all works referred to that have so far been published in it, and the latter for those that have not. The dates of the original German publication of each work are included in parentheses.

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225

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Index

- abstraction, 204
Adler, Alfred, 139
Adorno, Theodor W., 15, 84
agreement, *see* consensus,
 unanimity
Albert, Hans, 15
'alienation', 39, 43
Althusser, Louis, 60
analyst-patient relationship,
 168-9, 171, 173, 174
'anomie', 39, 55, 56
anxiety, 107, 160, 162, 163, 164,
 167, 168
Apel, K.-O., 184
Aristotle, 13
Austin, J. L., 181
autonomy, 3, 6, 9
 determinism and, 109-18
 Habermas's concept of, 10, 11,
 86, 93, 94, 102-3, 150,
 200-1, 206-8
 as therapeutic goal, 165,
 167-70, 174, 178-9, 208
'auxiliary statements', 138, 139,
 142-4, 146, 147, 153, 159

Bacon, Francis, 30
behaviourism, 119, 177
behaviour-modification, 160, 165,
 168-9, 173, 174
Benjamin, Walter, 84
Bentham, Jeremy, 30
Berkeley, George, 17, 77
Bernstein, Edward, 58, 59, 61, 62
Bloch, Ernest, 84

Boden, Margaret, 127
body therapy, 160, 170-1
Bohm, David, 77
Breuer, J., 123
'bridging statements', 119; *see also*
 reductionism
Bröcker, Walter, 23

capitalism, 59, 60; *see also*
 socialism
 crisis-potential, 1-3
 'end of ideology' thesis, 28
 'essential' characteristics, 54
 scientific investigation, 57, 64
 socialist critique, 202
Carnap, R., 29
causality, 17, 20, 200
 autonomy and, 94
 Habermas and, 102, 107,
 109-18
 human activity and, 9, 10, 162
 limits of, 76, 80, 85
'causality of fate', 111
central nervous system, 125-6
'civilization', Freud's concept,
 107, 114
co-counselling, 171-2
coercion, 113-14; *see also* power
communication, *see also* ideal
 speech situation, language
 distorted, 8, 85-7, 95, 98,
 167-8, 179
 Habermas and, 88, 89-90, 92,
 168, 195, 198, 201

- and ideal speech situation, 180-90
- theory of speech acts, 63
- communicative competence, theory of, 8, 181
- communicative interaction, 3, 74; *see also* communication, language
- compatibilism, 110-11, 113
- compromise, 195, 197-8
- compulsiveness, autonomy and, 109-18, 150, 170, 177, 179, 206, 207
- Comte, Auguste, 13, 17, 30, 33
- condensation, 104, 109, 112
- conscious, in 'topographical' model, 103, 104, 105
- consciousness raising, 160
- consensus, *see also* unanimity
 - and ideal speech situation, 190, 197, 198, 202
- 'conservatism', Comtean, 33
- constitutive interest doctrine, *see* interest-constitution theory
- control, 74, 76, 108
 - D-N model and, 70
 - and ideal speech situation, 181
 - in social practice, 167, 169, 174, 176
- corroboration, 136; *see also* induction
- criteria of validity, 9, 208
 - for critical social theory, 94, 134, 152-5, 158-9, 167, 180, 200-1
 - for general interpretations, 144-52
- hermeneutic knowledge and, 5
 - and interest-constitution, 66, 93
 - and normative judgements, 38-43, 51, 52, 56, 63
- psychoanalytic theory, 151
- self-reflective knowledge, 6
- value-freedom, 14, 21, 37, 38, 57
- critical social theory, 11, 201, 207; *see also* theory
 - emancipation and, 152
 - Fay on, 152-5
 - idealism and, 200
 - pessimism and, 159
 - and practice, 151; *see also* practice, therapeutic practice
 - psychotherapy and, 167, 178
 - self-fulfilling predictions and, 152-7
- 'critical theory', 11
- Dahrendorf, Ralf, 14
- death instinct, 107, 114
- deductive-nomological explanation
 - Popper and, 140
 - and the technical interest, 67-72
- defence mechanism, 104, 133
- democracy, Lipset's analysis, 55
- 'depth-hermeneutic understanding', 108, 112
- Descartes, René, 30
- determinism, 207
 - Habermas and, 102, 109, 110-13
- discourse
 - Habermas and theoretical, 180-1, 183-6, 188-9
 - rationality of practical, 190-8
- displacement, 104, 109, 112, 143
- domination, 3, 40
 - ideal speech situation, 181
 - in social practice, 167, 177
- dream interpretation, 7, 8, 104, 105, 109, 112, 124, 150
- dualism, Cartesian, 204
- Durkheim, E., 39

- Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 196
- ego, 131
 - 'alienated', 97
 - Freud, 117, 129, 133, 134
 - Habermas and, 7, 95-8
 - strengthening of, 103-9
- Ego and the Id, The*, 96, 97, 106
- Einstein, Albert, 135
- electro-convulsive therapy, 166
- emancipation, *see also* autonomy
 - Habermas and, 108, 113, 148, 152, 200
 - psychoanalysis and, 94-132
 - repressed unconscious, 8
 - as therapeutic goal, 167-8, 175, 178-9, 208
- emotion, 93, 207
 - cognitive elements in, 89
 - human capacity for, 177
- empirical-analytic science, 4-5, 10, 133-4, 152, 183
 - and general interpretations, 144, 147, 148
- object-domains, 80; *see also* object-domain
- psychoanalytic theory and, 102, 107, 108
- technical interest, 66-7, 73, 74, 76; *see also* interest-constitution theory
- 'empirical realism', 77
- empiricism, 36
 - Horkheimer, 22
 - Mill, 32
 - and rationalism, 35
- encounter group, *see* group therapy
- energy model, Freud's
 - neurological, 128-32
- 'enlightenment', Habermas's
 - concept of, 168, 171, 172, 176
- Epicurus, 30
- epiphenomenalism, 121-2
- ethics, 16, 32, 35; *see also* value-judgements, values
 - Kantian, 63
 - normative judgements, 9
 - politics and, 13
 - as positive science, 27
- experience, concept of, 88, 89
- explanandum*, 53-4, 55, 71, 142
- explanation
 - causal, 110
 - deductive-nomological (D-N) model, 68-72
 - logic of, 140
 - purposive, 110-13
- 'explanatory understanding', 6
- exploitation, 40, 41
- Eysenck, H. J., 135
- 'facticity', 73
- fact-value distinction, 26
- falsifiability, as demarcation criterion, 135-8, 140
- Fay, Brian, 11, 152
 - criteria of validity 152-4, 157-8
 - 'hermeneutics of nature', 81
 - positivism, 17, 24-6
 - technical interest doctrine, 67-72
- Feuerbach, Ludwig, 30
- Feyerabend, P., 136, 188, 189
- Frankfurt School, 1, 11, 13, 200, 201
- freedom, 40, 41, 200; *see also* emancipation
 - determinism and, 110, 113
 - scientific knowledge and, 31
- free-will, 110-11
- French Revolution, 34
- Freud, Sigmund, 114, 116, 164, 185
 - the ego, 104-9

- Habermas and, 7, 8, 10, 85, 148, 179
 hysteria, 123-4
 the id, 94-103, 159
 instincts, 117, 118, 143
 learning mechanisms, 133
 neurological energy model, 128-32
 Oedipus, 163
 Popper and, 135, 139-40
 Freudian theory, 150, 151;
see also psychoanalytic theory
 scientificity, 140-2, 144
- Gadamer, H.-G., 202
 Galileo, 30, 83, 204
 Gay, Peter, 62
 general interpretations,
 criteria of validity for,
 144-52
 German Association for Social
 Policy (*Verein für
 Sozialpolitik*), 14
 goal-directedness, concept of,
 88-9, 90
 group therapy, 160ff, 173-4
 growth movement, 160
- Habermas, Jürgen, 1, 10, 200
 conception of critical social
 theory, 4-9, 109, 201-2
 criteria of validity for general
 interpretations, 144-52
 critique of positivism, 12-13,
 15-16, 23-5
 emancipation, 109-18
 goal of psychoanalysis, 107-8
 the id, 95-103, 134
 ideal speech situation, 180-90
 interest-constitution theory,
 71, 72, 73-87
 and nature, 87-93
- normative judgments, 48
 politics of psychotherapy,
 167, 168-72, 176, 178, 179
 psychoanalytic theory, 10-11,
 133
 rationality of practical
 discourse, 190-3, 195-7
 reductionism, 118, 128, 129-31
 theory of knowledge-
 constitutive interests, 65, 66,
 67
- Hahn, K., 29
 hedonism, 30, 107
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich,
 83, 86, 95
 idealism, 199-200
 subject-object dichotomy,
 73, 108
- Heidelberg School, 14, 30, 32
 Hempel, Carl, 68, 70
 hermeneutic interpretation,
 Habermas's view, 112, 148
 hermeneutic social science, 22,
 152, 205
 hermeneutic theory
 and social theory, 3, 202
 and psychoanalytic theory, 7, 8
 'hermeneutics of nature',
 Habermas and, 78-9, 81, 84,
 87
 'historical-hermeneutic'
 knowledge, 5, 67, 78-9, 81,
 133, 183
- Hobbes, Thomas, 13, 29
 Hockett, C. F., 90
 Horkheimer, Max, 1, 12, 22
 human nature, 10, 87-93, 175
 Hume, David, 106
 positivism and, 16, 18, 30, 32
 hysteria, 104, 123
- id
 Freud, 104, 107, 134, 159

- Habermas, 7, 10, 95-103, 108,
 118
 idealism, 206
 Hegelian, 83, 84, 199-200
 transcendental, 77
 idealization, 138, 204
 'ideal speech situation',
 Habermas's concept of, 9,
 11, 167, 180-91, 195, 197-8
 identity-theory, 119
 'ideology',
 'end of', 28
 ideology-freedom, 49
 Marxist concept, 86, 87
 pseudo-knowledge, 16, 60
 social theory as critique of,
 47, 48, 178-9
 individual rights, 34, 57
 induction
 Comte and, 30
 and theory-testing, 135-7
 innatism, 122-3
 instincts, 127
 Freud, 96, 98-102, 117, 129, 143
 Habermas, 107, 118
 instrumentalism, 35
 and interest-constitution
 theory, 70-1, 73-8
 positivism, 20
 interactionism, 121
 interest-constitution theory, 5, 10,
 65-7, 84, 200; *see also*
 object-domain
 criticism of Habermas's, 78-87,
 91
 deductive-nomological
 explanation, 67-72
 and instrumentalism, 73-8
 interpretation, 36; *see also*
 hermeneutic interpretation
Introductory Lectures, 100, 128
- Jahoda, Marie, 97, 130
- Johnson, Virginia, 169
 justice, 39-40, 41
 Rawls's theory of, 11, 191ff
- Kant, Immanuel, 30-2, 63
 doctrine of value-freedom, 18
 Habermas and, 5, 73-4, 77
Kant's Weltanschauung, 30
 Kautsky, Karl, 58, 59
 Kline, Paul, 135
 knowledge, 66ff
 'empirical-analytic science',
 4-5, 66ff, 81; *see also*
 empirical-analytic science
 Habermas's categories of, 4-5,
 80, 83
 'historical-hermeneutic', 5,
 67, 78-9, 81, 133, 183
 'self-reflective', *see*
 'self-reflective knowledge'
 knowledge-constitutive interests,
see interest-constitution
 theory
Knowledge and Human Interests,
 6, 7, 8, 73, 75, 80, 83, 85,
 98
- Koigen, J., 58
 Korsch, Karl, 58, 63
 Kroner, Richard, 30-1, 32
 Kuhn, T. S., 136, 186
- labour, as species-universal
 characteristic, 5, 74, 83
 labour movement, 61
 labour theory of value, 40
 Lakatos, I., 136
 language, 3, 6, 10, 38, 181, 205;
see also communication,
 discourse, ideal speech
 situation
 Habermas and, 74, 92, 182,
 196-7
Legitimation Crisis, 180, 190

liberalism, 34, 186, 187
 libertarianism, 111
 Lichtheim, G., 62
 Liebknecht, Karl, 62
 Lipset, S. M., 55
 Locke, John, 72
 Lukács, G., 86

McCarthy, Thomas, 78, 180, 195
 Mach, Ernst, 17
 manipulation
 constitutive interest in, 71
 in social practice, 167, 174,
 175, 176
 Marcuse, Herbert, 1, 81, 83, 84
 positivism, 33
 value-freedom, 12
 Marx, Karl, 30, 34, 54, 61,
 139, 196
 alienation, 39
 exploitation, 40
 Hegel, 83, 84, 108
 labour, 74
 political economy, 57, 59
 Marxism, 1, 34, 45, 47, 84, 200
 reformism and, 58, 60
 Masters, W. H., 169
 materialism, 31, 53, 119, 206
 epiphenomenalism, 121
 Marx's historical, 59, 108
 nature and, 84
 meanings, *see* interpretation
 Menger, Carl, 30
 metaphysics, 16, 17, 19
 Mill, J. S., 18, 27, 30, 32, 34-5
 mind-body problem, 120; *see also*
 reductionism
 moralism, 58, 64
 morality, 31, 32, 60
 Reich on, 114
 moral values, *see* values
 Morris, W. R., 61

Nagel, Ernest, 40-1
 scientific reduction, 118-20, 131
 naturalism, 31
 ethical, 49, 52
 nature
 Habermas's view of, 78, 81,
 83, 84, 88, 92-3, 108
 Hegel's view of, 73
 hermeneutic science of, 72,
 78-9
 and human nature, 87-93
 Neurath, Otto, 29, 34
 neurophysiological reductionism,
 7, 116-17, 103, 124, 131
 neurophysiology, psychology and,
 118-28, 131
 neurosis
 distorted communication, 8, 86,
 87, 95
 Freud's theory, 116, 133
 Habermas on, 112, 179
 somatic character of, 125
 sources of, 7, 97, 150, 160
 normative judgement, *see also*
 value-judgements, values
 scientific criteria of validity,
 38-43
 social theories, 43-52, 56
 value-freedom, 24
 norms, complexity of in practice,
 167ff

'object', treating person as,
 174, 175, 176
 object-constitution, *see*
 interest-constitution theory
 object-domain, 5, 6, 108
 of empirical-analytic science,
 10, 76
 Habermas and, 66, 71, 74, 79,
 80, 81, 84, 86-8, 91, 93, 147
 properties defining 175
 objectivism, 66

'objectivity', 41, 108; *see also*
 interest-constitution theory,
 object-domain
 Habermas and, 74, 75, 80,
 98, 148
 scientific practice and, 2
 Oedipal conflict, 97, 163

perception, 89-90, 126, 203
 pessimism, 57-8, 150, 158-9
 physiology, *see*
 neurophysiology
 pleasure principle, 106
 pluralism, ontological, 67
 'policy science', 24-6; *see also*
 'scientific politics'
 political economy, 57, 59
 political philosophy
 normative principles and, 56
 political science and, 49
 political practice, 1, 3, 7, 63,
 64, 65
 political science, 49; *see also*
 'policy science', 'scientific
 politics'
 political values, 2, 178; *see also*
 value-judgements, values
 plurality of, 189
 politics, 9, 16, 25, 62
 as positive science, 27
 scientization of, 10, 13, 15,
 24, 28, 29, 30, 32, 34-5, 36,
 65
 Popper, Karl, 11, 53, 184, 186
 positivism, 15, 16
 on psychoanalytic theory,
 134-7, 139-42, 144
 positivism, 2-4, 15-22, 153;
 see also 'positivist
 conception of science'
 critical theory and, 9-11,
 12, 180, 199-200, 207
 critique of, 12ff, 65

histories of, 28-35
 'logical positivism', 16, 29
 misunderstandings of, 22-8
 preliminary assessment, 35-7
Positivismusstreit, 15
 'positivist conception of science',
 15-17, 19-23, 25, 176
*Positivist Dispute in German
 Sociology, The*, 12, 23
 power
 in ideal speech situation, 180,
 181, 184, 187
 in psychotherapy, 169, 171,
 174-6
 practice, *see also*
 therapeutic practice
 relationship with theory, 133,
 151, 152-9, 207
 pragmatism, 73, 204
 consensus theory of truth, 78
 quasi-transcendental, 77, 78, 87
 preconscious, in topographical
 model, 103, 104, 105
 prediction
 D-N model, 68, 69-71
 in empirical-analytic science,
 134
 self-fulfilling, 152-9
 theory testing and, 136-8,
 140, 142, 144-6, 147
 primary goods, Rawls's concept
 of, 194, 197
 primary processes, 104, 109, 124,
 125, 185
 projection, 146
 psychic energy, 128-32
 psychoanalysis, 6-7, 178
 Habermas and, 10-11, 133,
 168-71, 179
 and human emancipation,
 94-132
 relationship of theory and
 practice in, 8, 152-9

- theory and therapeutic success
in, 144, 160
- psychoanalytic interpretation,
validity of, 144-9
- psychoanalytic theory, 8, 11, 101
criteria of validity, 151
psychological concepts, 102
as 'science', 135-44, 150, 176
and theory of technique,
159-66
- psychology, 99, 130, 160
and neurophysiology, 118-28
- psychosexual development, theory
of, 7, 8, 97, 133, 147
- 'psychosomatic' phenomena, 123-5
- psychotherapy, 7; *see also*
psychoanalysis, therapeutic
practice
neurotherapy, 125, 128
politics of, 167-79
theory and practice in, 133-66
purposiveness, 88, 89, 90
- quantum theory, 75-7
- rationalism, 35, 204
- rationality, 187
and compulsiveness, 115
instrumental, 2, 107
of practical discourse, 190-8
- Rawls, John, 11, 191-4, 197
- reaction-formation, 143
- 'reactive attitude', 173
- realism, 35, 203-4;
see also truth
empirical, 77-8
Nagel, 120
non-positivist forms, 19-20
theoretical, 36, 71
- reality, 30, 182; *see also*
object-domain
'objectifications' of, 81
- subject dependence of, 203
- reality principle, 106
- reason, 2-3, 63, 208;
see also rationality
as foundation of critique, 201
instrumental conception, 108
resistance to, 115
as therapeutic goal, 167
- Reason and Revolution*, 12, 33
- reconciliation, Hegelian theme, 95
- reductionism, 91, 119-28, 204,
205; *see also*
neurophysiological
reductionism
conceptual reduction, 120
deterministic, 102, 113
explanatory, 120, 125
Freud's, 128-32
Habermas, 109
ontological, 120
'reformism', 58, 62, 63, 64
Reich, Wilhelm, 114, 125
body therapy, 160, 170-1
- reification, 2, 86
- relativity, theory of, 135
- religion, 16, 19, 34
- repression, 104, 141, 142, 146,
148, 170
- resistance, 146, 148, 152, 171
- revisionism, 58, 59, 62
- Rickert, H., 30
- romanticism, 83
- Saint-Simon, H., 13, 17, 27, 29,
30, 33
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 32
- Schmoller, Gustav, 14
- science, 18, 59, 153, 201;
see also empirical-analytic
science
'instrumentalist' view, 19, 71
Marcuse and, 81, 83

- positivist conception of, 4, 13,
14, 16, 65, 176
and prediction, 70
- psychoanalysis as, 7, 135-44
'realist' view 19, 20
value-freedom, 21, 180
values and, 22, 38, 58-65,
199, 200, 202
- scientific knowledge, 60
Kant, 31
neutrality of, 2
prediction and, 70
rational solutions through,
14, 18, 20, 35
'scientific politics', 15, 17-18;
see also politics,
scientization of
positivism and, 21, 22, 24, 26,
28-9, 32, 34, 35, 37, 199
- scientific theory, 2, 46, 70;
see also theory, theory
testing
cognitive status, 73
prediction and, 144-5
- scientism
positivism and, 4, 15-16,
19-23, 29, 32, 34-7, 199
value freedom, 42, 65
- Searle, J. R., 181
- self-recognition, 149-50
- 'self-reflective knowledge', 5, 6, 9,
116, 129, 131, 151, 201,
205-8
as therapeutic goal, 167-71, 174
- self-understanding, as goal,
152, 164-5, 172, 177
- Shapiro, Jeremy, 98
- significance, concept of,
38, 52-8
- social control, 2, 33;
see also control
- social organization, 33
happiness and, 27
- of theoretical discourse, 186-9
- social science
hermeneutic, 1, 86
positivist, 1, 2
potentially critical, 46
value-free, 25, 26, 40
- social structure, 2, 158
- social theory, 3
concept of significance in, 52-8
critical theorists' views,
1-4, 9-11
Habermas, 4-9
normative judgements, 43-52
values and, 64, 180;
see also values
- Social Theory and Political
Practice*, 17, 24, 67, 152
- socialism, 38ff, 45, 56-7
evolutionary, 62
scientific, 58, 59, 60, 65
scientism and, 34, 57
- space, Habermas's notion of,
17, 76, 80, 85
- species-nature, 92; *see also*
human nature
- Spencer, H., 30
- Strawson, P. F., 173
- structural identity thesis, D-N
model and, 69, 70
- Structure of Science, The*, 120
- Studies on Hysteria*, 123
- subjectivity, 98
alienated, 108
- subject-object dichotomy, 73, 84,
108, 199-200
- sublimation, 141-2, 143
- substance, 76, 80, 85
- super-ego
Freud, 103, 106, 107, 114
Habermas, 7, 95, 97
- symbols, use of, 104, 109
- Taylor, Charles, 49-50, 52, 54-6

- 'technical' interest, in
psychotherapy, 173, 176
- technical interest constitution,
see interest-constitution
theory
- technology, 25
Marcuse, 81, 83
- teleology, 88
- theory, *see also* psychoanalytic
theory, scientific theory
cognitive status, 120
ontological adequacy of, 177
relationship with practice, 133,
152-9, 207
and technique, 159-66
Theory of Justice, A, 191
'theory of technique', 159-66
- theory-testing, 135-44, 145, 147,
204
- therapeutic attitude, 174, 176
- therapeutic goal, 165-6, 168-71,
174, 177-8
- therapeutic practice, and
psychoanalytic theory, 11,
160, 176, 177
- therapeutic process, 208
deterministic view, 116
Habermas, 96, 169-70, 174
neurotic activity in, 151
theoretical explanation, 146
theory and, 159-66
- therapeutic success, 150, 152
theory and, 159-66, 178
- therapeutic technique,
nature of, 168, 170, 171, 177
theory and, 159-66
- Thompson, E. P., 60-2
- Thorpe, W. H., 90
- time, Habermas's notion of, 17,
76, 80, 85
- topographical model, 103
- transference, 106, 146, 150
- truth, *see also* criteria of
validity, realism
communicative activity and,
8, 9
correspondence theory of, 19
distinctive criterion of,
154-5, 158
Habermas's theory of, 11, 73,
76-8, 167, 180-90
pragmatist theory, 70
- unanimity, notion of,
192-4, 197
- unconscious, *see also* id
abolition of, 103-9
causality and, 94
Freud, 185
Habermas, 95, 100, 117, 179
power of repressed, 8, 116
- understanding (*Verständigung*),
goal of communication, 181,
195-6
- utilitarianism
normative judgement and, 44,
49
scientific politics and, 26,
27-8, 30, 32, 34, 35
- Utopianism, 59
- value-freedom, 10, 65, 199
concept of significance, 52-8
criteria of validity, 38-43
moralism, 63
normative judgements, 43-52
positivism, 12-15, 18, 21-4,
28-30, 32, 36, 37, 180
socialist theory, 38ff
- value-judgements, 25, 26, 43, 55;
see also normative
judgement
'appraising', 40-1
'characterizing', 40-1
political action and, 24
Weber and, 40-2

- value pluralism, 192
- values
plurality of, 189
science and, 14, 22, 24, 38,
58-65, 166, 178, 180, 199,
200, 202
social theory, 41, 50, 52, 158,
165
- 'veil of ignorance', Rawls's
concept of, 191-4
- Vienna Circle, 16, 29, 34
- visual imagery, 104, 109
- Weber, Max
concept of significance, 52,
53, 54
doctrine of value-freedom, 12,
14-15, 18, 25-6, 28, 32, 41-2
- Wilson, Glenn, 135
- Windelband, W., 30