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THE INTELLECTUAL LEGACY OF CRITICAL THEORY: ORIGINS, TRANSFORMATIONS, AND INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUES

Mete Han Arıtürk*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the intellectual legacy of the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory, focusing on its origins, transformations, and intergenerational dialogues. The School's primary objective is to philosophically analyze and critique the social pathologies and contradictions engendered by modern capitalist societies. Influenced by philosophers like Kant, Hegel, and Marx, as well as psychoanalysis and Weberian rationalization debates, the School addressed historical context, capitalism's cultural forms, and new types of social subjectivity. The article traces the evolution from the first generation's critique of modernity and domination (Horkheimer, Adorno), through the innovations of the second generation with Habermas's theory of communicative action, to the contributions of the third generation, particularly Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. It highlights Honneth's effort to center the struggle for recognition within Critical Theory—addressing the perceived shortcomings of previous generations (especially the pessimism of the first generation and the moral experiences overlooked by Habermas's theory)—and provide a new normative foundation. The theory of recognition reveals the moral dimensions underlying social conflicts and emancipatory struggles, emphasizing the importance of intersubjective relations.

Keywords: Frankfurt School, Critical Theory, Social Pathology, Theory of Recognition, Capitalism

* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Afyon Kocatepe Üniversitesi, metehanariturk@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-3773-9610

ELEŞTİREL TEORİNİN ENTELEKTÜEL MİRASI: KÖKENLER, DÖNÜŞÜMLER VE KUŞAKLARARASI DİYALOGLAR

ÖZ

Bu makale, Frankfurt Okulu ve Eleştirel Kuram'ın entelektüel mirasını, kökenlerini, geçirdiği dönüşümleri ve kuşaklararası diyalogları incelemektedir. Okulun temel amacı, modern kapitalist toplumların yarattığı toplumsal patolojileri ve çelişkileri felsefi bir zeminde analiz etmek ve eleştirmektir. Kant, Hegel, Marx gibi filozofların yanı sıra psikanaliz ve Weberci rasyonelleşme tartışmalarından beslenen Okul, tarihsel bağlamı, kapitalizmin kültürel formlarını ve yeni toplumsal öznelilik biçimlerini ele almıştır. Makale, Horkheimer ve Adorno gibi ilk kuşak düşünürlerin modernite ve tahakküm eleştirilerinden başlayarak, Habermas'ın iletişimsel eylem kuramıyla ikinci kuşağın getirdiği yeniliklere ve son olarak Axel Honneth'in tanınma teorisiyle üçüncü kuşağın katkılarına odaklanmaktadır. Honneth'in, önceki kuşakların (özellikle ilk kuşağın kötümserliği ve Habermas'ın kuramının göz ardı ettiği ahlaki deneyimler) eksikliklerine bir yanıt olarak tanınma mücadelesini Eleştirel Kuram'ın merkezine yerleşirmesi ve kurama yeni bir normatif temel sağlama çabası vurgulanmaktadır. Tanınma teorisi, toplumsal çatışmaların ve özgürleşme mücadelelerinin temelinde yatan ahlaki boyutları ve öznelarası ilişkilerin önemini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Frankfurt Okulu, Eleştirel Teori, Toplumsal Patoloji, Tanınma Teorisi, Kapitalizm

1. INTRODUCTION

It would not be wrong to say that critical theorists formulate their theories with the aim of human emancipation and liberation. These theorists try to show whether certain social formations would constitute an obstacle to such emancipation and liberation. Theorists in this tradition formulate their criticisms in terms derived from their own explanations of social formations (Thompson, 2015, p. 176). In other words, they strive to pinpoint the societal structures that might hinder the path towards greater freedom. In doing so, thinkers believe that through their critiques they are already preparing the resources and tools for a more emancipated future. It is this particular set of beliefs that gives Critical Theory what Fraser describes as "a peculiar dialectic of immanence and transcendence" (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 202). In order to understand this School¹, it is necessary to understand the place and importance of the Frankfurt School in the history of philosophy. Within this framework, the history of this tradition will be discussed first. Every discipline

¹ Throughout this text, the capitalized term 'School' refers specifically to the Frankfurt School, also known as Critical Theory.

and field of study has a relationship with its history. However, when it comes to philosophy, this relationship is so strong that it can never be dissolved. In the history of philosophy, the Frankfurt School necessitates a holistic analysis with its relationship between generations and its history.

One of the most timeless questions in the history of philosophy is: "what does it mean to live a good life?". This question has occupied many philosophers throughout their lives, and has been an issue that every thinker had been interested in social and political philosophy, from Plato to Aristotle, from Thomas Hobbes to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from G. W. F. Hegel to Karl Marx, has pondered and reflected on. The tradition known as the Frankfurt School has placed this question at the centre of its research and has endeavoured to reconstruct the social philosophy on a critical level. The first generation representatives of the School, such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, based their work on the social philosophy with an interdisciplinary perspective and methodology, and attempted to analyse the political, social and intellectual problems of the era on this ground.² Axel Honneth, a proponent of the latest generation of Critical Theory, asserted that the objective of social philosophy is to identify and address the issues that hinder individuals in society from achieving a good life:

“Finally, this historical reflection will allow us to give a rough outline of the theoretical claims and specific questions characteristic of social philosophy. Since its primary task is the diagnosis of processes of social development that must be understood as preventing the members of a society from living a “good life,” it relies upon criteria of an ethical nature. Unlike both moral and political philosophy, therefore, social philosophy can be understood as providing an instance of

² Immediately after assuming the directorship of the Institute, Max Horkheimer delivered an inaugural speech in which he explained the new programme of the Institute, its interests, its perspective on issues and the methodology planned to be used in research. In this framework, Horkheimer grouped social problems under three research topics in the Institute's programme: a) The economic organisation of society. b) The psychological development of individuals. c) Legal, cultural, ideological, moral, etc. changes in the structure of society (in a sense, all changes in the way of life of individuals). In this context, the main issue is to analyse the relationship between these three topics within the framework of the participation and cooperation of different disciplines. The social philosophy- which first and foremost investigates concrete phenomena that can only be understood in relation to the social life of concrete human beings (elements such as state, law, morality, economy, culture, art, religion, language, etc., in short, the entire material and spiritual culture of humanity) - in a sense represents the intersection point of these different fields of research. (Horkheimer, 1989, p. 33)

reflection (*Reflexionsinstanz*), within which criteria for successful forms of social life are discussed” (Honneth, 2007, p. 4).

The positioning of each thinker and school against the questions we face has also determined the axis of their answers. In order to understand the Frankfurt School and thus Critical Theory, it is essential to understand and explain the history of the School and the Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*). The School, founded in conjunction with the Institute, has left a lasting legacy. This legacy is evident today in Honneth's theory of recognition, and the School's history continues to have a deep impact on the development of critical theories. This is partly because the School has witnessed the emergence and collapse of Nazism, Fascism and Communism as well as the two biggest wars of the world. It is in relation to this historical process that the School has made it one of its main tasks to reveal and overcome the modern social pathologies that lead to wars and destructive ideologies.

2. The Origins of the Frankfurt School

The Frankfurt School, in other words Critical Theory, has an institutional structure that cannot be separated from the Institute for Social Research. If a research is to be conducted on the chronological history of the Institute and the School, what this chronology does and does not include in the rich history of the School becomes an important issue of debate (Rush, 2004b). Hermann Weil's donation in 1923 provided the material basis for the Frankfurt School, marking the beginning of its physical presence.³ Carl Grünberg was the first to assume the position of director of the Institute for Social Research, which was founded in Frankfurt on 3 February 1923.⁴ Friedrich Pollock (1894-1970) was Grünberg's assistant. The "Archive for the History of Socialism and the Labor Movement", founded by Grünberg, was moved to the Institute in 1910 and became the publication organ of the Institute. In 1926, Leo Löwenthal (1900-1993) joined the Institute, and by the end of the 1920s, Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), who would become one of the paramount figures of Frankfurt School, began to show interest in the Institute.

³ Karl August Wittfogel, Franz Borkenau, Henryk Grossman, Friedrich Pollock, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Neuman and others can be counted as the important founders of the Frankfurt School that shaped the intellectual life of the 20th century. For detailed information, see also. (Gülenç, 2015, p. 31)

⁴ Two important works that influenced Critical Theory before the foundation of the Institute are Ernst Bloch's (1885-1977) *The Spirit of Utopia*, published in 1918, and Walter Benjamin's (1892-1940) *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*.

Max Horkeimer (1895-1973) and Erich Fromm (1900-1980) joined the Institute in 1930 and Max Horkheimer took over as director in the same year. Grünberg's "Archive", which ceased to be published in 1930, was replaced by the "Journal for Social Research" in 1932. In the same year, with both the establishment of the "Journal for Social Research" and Herbert Marcuse's (1898-1979) joining the Institute, the founding process of the Frankfurt School was completed. However, with Hitler's coming to power in 1933, the Weimar Republic came to an end and the Institute became a target of the Nazis (Rush, 2004a, p. xii). In the same year, the Institute building was searched by the Gestapo⁵ and the building was given to the use of the National Socialist German Students' League (*Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*) and the Institute was temporarily moved to Geneva.

2.1. Exile and Evolution: The Frankfurt School in the Shadow of World War II

The move of the first generation of thinkers of Critical Theory to the United States due to the World War II, together with the student movements of the 1960s and the expectation of a philosophy that could reveal the forms of power and domination characteristic of a prosperous society, marked a phase of rebirth and maturation for this tradition. Considering the black rights movements, women's rights and gay rights struggles of the period in the United States, these social and political problems began to be seen as equivalent to and even prior to the class problem. If we need to examine this migration process, which also influenced the Frankfurt School theoretically in a chronological context, it is possible to say that the process started in the mid-1930s.

In 1934, the Institute and the representatives of the Frankfurt School fled the Nazis and emigrated to America. The Institute moved to New York in partial association with Columbia University. Horkheimer, Fromm, Löwenthal, Marcuse and Pollock emigrated to America. Adorno enrolled at Oxford University as an "advanced student". It was only in 1938 that Adorno came to America and was formally inducted as a member of the Institute. The development of Critical Theory in America and the finalisation of its theoretical background gained momentum in 1936 when Franz Neumann (1901-1954) joined the Institute and published *Studies on Authority and the Family*, a joint work of the School. In 1937 Horkheimer published

⁵ Gestapo is an abbreviation of Geheime Staatspolizei (German: "State Secret Police"). Founded in 1933, it was the secret police organisation of the German state under the Nazi regime, notorious for its brutal methods and operations. The Gestapo was established in Germany and other occupied territories to eliminate those who opposed the Nazis and, together with the Sicherheitsdienst (SD; "Special Service"), took part in the deportation of Jews from all over Europe to concentration camps. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.-a)

"Traditional and Critical Theory" and in 1938 Adorno became an official member of the Institute and moved to New York (Rush, 2004a, p. xii).

With the outbreak of the World War II in 1939, some ruptures began to occur in the Frankfurt School. This process, which started with Fromm's departure from the Institute, continued with Benjamin's suicide on the French-Spanish border in 1940 during his escape from the Nazis.⁶ In 1939, another important change was the replacement of the Institute's periodical "Journal for Social Research" with the journal "Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences". In 1941, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the members of the Institute moved to different parts of the United States, and this journal, too, soon ceased to be published. In the same year, Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* and Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* were published. In 1942, Marcuse and Neumann joined the OSS (Office of Strategic Services)⁷. In the same year, Pollock started working in the Anti-Trust⁸ unit of the US Department of Justice. Löwenthal was assigned to another military organisation, OWI (Office of War Information). During these affairs, Horkheimer and Adorno continued their theoretical work by not working in organisations related to the war. Following the end of the war, the two thinkers worked on their joint work, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which was published in 1947. Horkheimer and Adorno left America in 1949 and re-established the Institute in Frankfurt. Löwenthal, Marcuse and Neumann left the Institute and remained in America. In 1951 Adorno's *Minima Moralia* and in 1955 Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation* were published (Rush, 2004a, p. xiii).

2.2. Institute for Social Research and New Generations

Just as the Institute for Social Research cannot be considered independent of the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory, the directorship of this institution cannot be considered independent of its guiding influence on the critical theorists of its period. Horkheimer and Adorno in terms of their influence on the first generation, Habermas in terms of his influence on the second generation and Honneth in terms of his influence on the third generation can be counted as important thinkers who undertook this directorship. Adorno, who took over the directorship of the Frankfurt School from Horkheimer, served as co-chairman and then president of the Institute from 1955 until

⁶ Hannah Arendt, who would cross the same point of the border a few months later, provided Adorno with copies of Benjamin's *Theses on the History of Philosophy*, which the Institute published in 1942. Rush, "Chronology", p. xiv.

⁷ It was a state organisation created between 1942-45 to sabotage the military efforts of enemy countries. In the post-war period, this organisation was replaced by the CIA. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.-b)

⁸ The anti-trust unit is a state institution established to prevent monopolisation in the economy and to ensure a healthy competitive environment. See also on the institution. (Alexandra Twin, n.d.)

Horkheimer's retirement in 1958. In 1956, Jürgen Habermas became a member of the Institute and worked as Adorno's assistant. In 1964 Marcuse published his best-selling book, *One-Dimensional Man*. In addition, the philosopher came to be regarded as the philosophical mentor of the New Left⁹ and student movements in America (Rush, 2004a, p. xiv). Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, published in 1966, and Habermas' *Knowledge and Human Interests* and *Technology and Science as "Ideology"*, published in 1968, are considered important works in the Frankfurt School corpus.

In 1969, during the SDS¹⁰ (Students for a Democratic Society) protests in Frankfurt, Adorno's office at the Institute for Social Research was occupied, leading him to call the police. This event marked the beginning of the split between the German student movement and the Institute. Adorno died the same year. In 1970, after Adorno's death, his unfinished work *Aesthetic Theory* was published as a book. In the same year, Habermas declined the offer to lead the Institute and became the head of the Max Planck Institute (Max Planck Gesellschaft) in Munich. In the period following Habermas' departure, the Institute for Social Research moved away from the focus of Critical Theory (Rush, 2004a, p. xv). However, with Habermas' re-assumption of the position of director of the Institute for Social Research in 1983, the Institute began to regain its focal point in a philosophical context.

After Adorno, different themes were addressed in the works of Karl-Otto Apel (1922-2017), Claus Offe (1940-), Albrecht Wellmer (1939-2018) and other thinkers within Critical Theory. Published in 1981, Habermas' *The Theory of Communicative Action* was an important work that shaped the future of Critical Theory. This work was followed in the next decade by Axel Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition*, written in 1992. This work was the work that laid out the theory of recognition, which can be argued to offer a new ground of discussion for the third generation of critical theorists. In 1997, Axel Honneth became the director of the Institute, a position he held until 2018. The preceding historical overview encapsulates the significant developments within the Frankfurt School up to the dawn of the 21st century. This trajectory underscores the dynamic evolution of Critical Theory, marked by a shift from

⁹ The New Left emerged in relation to the student movements in the United States in the early 1960s, which distanced themselves from official communism, orthodox Marxism and mainstream social democracy. It advocated a holistic political movement, including social movements such as feminism and environmentalism, which were considered new at the time. (Davis, n.d.)

¹⁰ SDS was founded in 1959; it is an anti-violence student movement that began with the anti-Vietnam War movement. It was also an organisation that played an active role in the civil rights movement in the United States and later in student movements in different parts of the world. In 1969, it began to split into different factions and disbanded in 1970. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.-c)

a focus on diversifying research subjects to a diversification of theoretical frameworks.

3. Genealogy of Critical Theory: The Philosophical Foundations of the Frankfurt School

In the Frankfurt School, the time span of almost a century from Horkheimer to Honneth has brought about an orientation from the diversification and differentiation of research topics to the diversification and differentiation in theory. Ultimately, these transformations have necessitated the search for a new method that implies a methodological differentiation in Critical Theory. This is because the diversity and difference in the problems of the age have necessitated changes in the school tradition, which implies the search for a new normative reference point and a new method. In this context, it is important to discuss the basic principles in the theoretical background of Critical Theory, which we can call the philosophical genealogy of Critical Theory, and the philosophical changes that have taken place in its nearly one-century long history.

According to Neil Roberts, the Frankfurt School became what it is today under its director, Max Horkheimer, and Critical Theory was predominantly shaped within the tradition of Western philosophy (Roberts, 2009, p. 297). From its inception under Horkheimer, the Frankfurt School, a multidisciplinary academic group, pioneered a distinct philosophical approach to social critique that became known as Critical Theory. This methodology prioritized the analysis and evaluation of society and culture, utilizing perspectives from multiple disciplines to challenge prevailing power structures and promote social change. According to Honneth, Hammer and Gordon, the early Frankfurt School was particularly focused on exposing the pathologies and implicit utopian possibilities of late-capitalist modernity (Gordon et al., 2018, p. xiv). By claiming that modern capitalist societies produce social activities, attitudes, or personality traits that lead to a pathological distortion of our reasoning abilities (Honneth, 2009, p. vii). Honneth elucidates the influence of contemporary capitalism on social pathologies. Critical Theory is deeply rooted in Western intellectual tradition, with its origins linked to Immanuel Kant's work, Hegel's critiques of Kant's deontological ethics, and Karl Marx's efforts to convert Hegel's idealist dialectical concepts into a materialist framework. The advent of psychoanalysis, debates on the limitations of positivism, Georg Lukács's critiques of reification, and Max Weber's examinations of societal rationalization and the legitimization of authority and domination offer significant insights into the historical development and contemporary relevance of Critical Theory (Roberts, 2009, p. 296).

Critical theorists trying to define the Frankfurt School recognise "Frankfurt School" as a name with many connotations that cannot be easily

summarised (Gordon et al., 2018, p. xiv). This is because the Frankfurt School, or Critical Theory, has undergone great changes since its emergence in the 1920s. Initially an interdisciplinary research programme aimed at explaining the pathological effects of capitalist society on the individual and culture, this school of thought has become an important philosophical movement and style whose influence has not diminished even today.¹¹ According to Honneth and others, the Frankfurt School has become, in a broad sense, an emancipatory and critical orientation in social theory, a solid link between modern philosophy and the social sciences, an almost inevitable common term (Gordon et al., 2018, p. xiv).

From another perspective, the Institute carries with it a structure that analyses the contradictions of modernity concerning its different aspects and questions the limits of the existing social and political order. The Frankfurt School sought to perform social, psychological, and philosophical research to transcend the constraints of contemporary social and philosophical thought through various mediations. Within the framework of these objectives, it can be argued that the Frankfurt School was built on common foundations shaped by the contributions of philosophy, sociology and psychoanalysis. In this axis, Glyn Daly categorises the intellectual interest of Frankfurt School thinkers under three headings: "(i) a fundamental emphasis on historical context rather than abstract theory; (ii) a systematic engagement with the cultural forms that contemporary capitalism was giving rise to; (iii) an analysis of the new types of social subjectivity that were being engendered as a result of these cultural forms." (Daly, 2006, p. 32).

While the term Critical Theory is occasionally employed interchangeably with the interests and works of the School, it would be erroneous to restrict this concept solely to the Frankfurt School tradition today. This tendency renders Critical Theory seemingly more rigid and static than it truly is or has the potential to be. In any significant theoretical tradition, alongside the innovations of a new generation of theorists, the founders of the Frankfurt School emphasized a concept of Critical Theory that remains immanent in historical change by fostering a critical-dialectical perspective on the present and offering a mechanism for future transformation. Within this context, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse adopted Karl Marx's perspective that philosophy's true aim should be to transform the world, moving beyond merely offering various interpretations of it (Engels, 1994, p. 65). According to Marx, transforming the world entails

¹¹ From its inception in the 1920s, the distinctive philosophical and social style of the Frankfurt School, a multidisciplinary academic group, came to be known as Critical Theory. According to Honneth, Hammer and Gordon, the early Frankfurt School was particularly focussed on exposing the manifest pathologies and implicit utopian possibilities of late-capitalist modernity (Gordon et al., 2018, p. xiv.).

transcending the dichotomy between theoretical investigation and action, rather than dismissing one in favor of the other. Theorists of the Frankfurt School contend that the critical perspective must diverge from a logical and abstract philosophical tradition that fails to contest the social status quo, advocating instead for movements that facilitate social change on an emancipatory level (Calhoun & Karaganis, 2000, p. 179). This argument finds its clearest expression in the context of the criticism of modernity and enlightenment. In this respect, critical theorists have taken a special interest in the idea of modernity and the different historical moments in which it was actualised.

4. The Nexus of Modernity and Critical Theory

Since the Enlightenment, philosophers and social theorists have contended that there exists a dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Nevertheless, this often portrays modernity in a reductive and monolithic manner, as though it were uniform and progressing solely in one direction. The Frankfurt School, drawing from the dialectical tradition and philosophical legacy of Hegel and Marx, contends that modernity is inherently complicated and contradictory. For these theorists, it is essential to interpret modernity as the emergence of diverse and conflicting potentials within a highly intricate historical process that encompasses the ascendance of democracy and science alongside Nazism and Stalinism. Discussing history in this context entails acknowledging the variances within modernity and recognizing the theory as an element of the historical narrative influenced by its developmental circumstances (Calhoun & Karaganis, 2000, p. 179). It is essential to acknowledge that the Frankfurt School's critical philosophy is reflexive. Critical Theory is cognizant of its own origins. Recognizing its beginnings entails understanding the social and historical contexts that facilitated its emergence. In other words, Critical Theory is aware of both its roots in the historical position of society and its function in social transformation (Morrow & Brown, 1994, pp. 5–6). Therefore, through this awareness, it is possible for the theory to criticise both itself and the conditions in which it exists. The first condition for the theory to be able to make such a criticism is to accept that it is a part of the social reality from which it emerges. In this context, the main task of every social theory can be clearly put as follows:

“It is to investigate not only social institutions and practices, but also the beliefs that agents hold about society: not only "social reality" in the narrowest sense, but also "social knowledge" as part of this reality. A complete theory of society will therefore form part of its own object field. That is, a theory of society is (among other things) a theory about the beliefs that agents hold about society, but it is itself such a belief. Therefore, if a theory of society is to account for all

of the beliefs held by agents in society, it will have to account for itself as such a belief. A theory of society is said to have a "reflexive epistemic structure" if it accounts for its "context of origin and context of application" in a specific way" (Geuss, 2002, p. 86).

This insight on Critical Theory represents a significant rationale for not exclusively associating the theory with the early thinkers of the Frankfurt School. The central thesis is that Critical Theory encompasses a broader endeavour of contemplation regarding the potentials and actualities of modernity. The early theorists of the Frankfurt School notably clashed regarding the possibilities for revolutionary change and the means by which it could be actualized. The circle addressing these inquiries also cultivated intimate connections with contemporaries like Walter Benjamin, who was never entirely affiliated with the Institute for Social Research. The second generation of Frankfurt School thinkers, notably Jürgen Habermas and Albrecht Welmer, immediately and provocatively interacted with the work of their predecessors. The third generation was defined by theorists like Axel Honneth and Seyla Benhabib. Conversely, the Critical Theory initiative—especially the appealing elements of the early Frankfurt School's legacy—cultivates a more expansive framework for analysis. Critical Theory broadly aligns with the foundational critiques of integrative social processes by Michel Foucault and François Lyotard, Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical exploration of the interplay between human action and social order reproduction, and Jacques Derrida's critical examination of philosophical history (Calhoun & Karaganis, 2000, pp. 179–180).

5. Shifts, Transformations, and Later Generations within the Frankfurt School

Nearly all theorists of the Frankfurt School regarded totalitarianism as a crisis for Marxist theory. The achievements of Stalinism and Nazism provided Marxist social theorists with what appeared to be definitive proof that the working class, traditionally seen as the embodiment of social and political liberty, had played a role in the disasters of Western civilization. Totalitarianism demonstrated its inability to fulfil the emancipatory promises of Marxism, liberalism, and the Enlightenment. In the late 1930s, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse endeavoured to reevaluate capitalism and harmonize Marxism with the unforeseen emergence of totalitarianism, without adopting the radical revolutionary stance typically associated with the working class in Marxist theory. The exodus of Frankfurt School leaders to America following Hitler's rise to power is significant at this juncture. The merger and harmonization of working-class radicalism with capitalism fostered the idea in the existence of indirect and more effective methods to obscure social tensions. The Frankfurt School transitioned from Marxist

premises on production processes, class conflict, and the primacy of economic relations to a broader and more pessimistic perspective on cultural analysis by examining authoritarian experiences and American capitalism. This perspective emphasizes a thorough examination of the application of reason for rationalization within Enlightenment philosophy. Critical theorists have analysed how bureaucratic regimes and large-scale capitalism limit human potential, a concept reinforced by Max Weber's notion of the "iron cage" of formal reason. Their inquiry culminated in a novel sociological theory termed "administered society". Critical Theory has evolved to analytically address contemporary social issues and transform reality in accordance with emerging historical and social practices. In the contemporary capitalist framework, power techniques can mitigate or intensify tensions between the state and capitalist enterprises, allowing for collaboration through mass persuasion (political campaigns, advertising) to cultivate a populace that prioritizes financial acquisition over fundamental liberty. This new system may enable consumers (of industrial products and political candidates) to perceive that they are making decisions. The emergence of mass culture, together with governmental and corporate media, constrains their choices. The Frankfurt School contended that these restricted options for post-war individuals hindered substantial dissent against the established quo. These theorists ground their critiques on the diminishment of human reason to an instrument for subjugating nature and subsequently humanity.

Enlightenment philosophers believed that reason held optimistic potential, as it presumed individuals would employ rational thought to critically evaluate all prevailing social systems and construct an improved society. Subsequent history has demonstrated that reason has been effectively employed by capitalism and the state solely for technical functions in governance and production. The prevailing societal forces have employed reason not to emancipate individuals from power dynamics and their inherent constraints, but rather to establish new institutions and mechanisms—such as states and markets—that appear to be beyond human oversight and increasingly immune to critique and regulation. Individuals have started to experience a sense of powerlessness in the face of large multinational firms and capitalist markets, akin to their feelings towards totalitarian regimes. This sense of helplessness and isolation is a significant factor in why individuals passively acquiesce to authoritarian regimes. The Frankfurt School sought to demonstrate how emancipation, which could enhance human potential, ultimately undermined reason by generating the fears characteristic of the twentieth century (Calhoun & Karaganis, 2000, pp. 181–182).

Dialectics of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno's post-war critique of the Enlightenment and culture industry, centers on this issue. Enlightenment thought sought to free man from myth and emancipate him. However, the fully enlightened world has become increasingly perilous. From

Freud's connections between parental authority and fascism, and Marcuse's concept of a one-dimensional society, are prevalent in numerous publications of the Frankfurt School, which address this tension. To achieve critique and social transformation, intellectuals have contested the system's comprehensive mechanisms and rationale. Adorno's exploration of negative dialectics and the critical utopian essence of contemporary art, Marcuse's evaluation of libido within culture and aspirations for a New Left, and Benjamin's emphasis on historical rupture are all significant in this context. Jürgen Habermas' work represents a leading contemporary expression of the quest for emancipatory resources, examining the systemic integration of modern society in the formation of an emancipatory human subject and ethical framework. Theorists of the Frankfurt School employed Marxism, psychoanalysis, German idealism, Romanticism, art history, and aesthetics to examine these issues. However, while Frankfurt School stalwarts like Friedrich Pollock and Franz Neumann contributed to the study of the state apparatus and the economy, they were less interested in political economy.

The process of diversification in the fields of interest of the thinkers of the school started with the second generation, of which Habermas can be considered as the Pioneer. Furthermore, the process of moving away from political economy-centred philosophy continued with the emergence of the third generation in Critical Theory. The research topics of the school began to form a wide range of topics, from feminism to recognition. In this period, a new generation, which we can call the third generation, was added to the Critical Theory tradition with many names such as Amy Allen, Maeve Cooke, Rahel Jaeggi, Rainer Forst, Seyla Benhabib; however, it would not be wrong to claim that Axel Honneth is one of the most influential thinkers of the third generation with his theory of recognition. It can be said that the concept of political economy, which we have mentioned before, gained a different dimension with Axel Honneth and regained importance within the theory of recognition. The process of transition from the second generation to the third generation in critical theory and the changes experienced are important for understanding Honneth's philosophy. The area where we can observe this process and transition most clearly is the philosophical similarities and differences between Habermas, who is seen as the representative of the second generation, and his student Honneth, who is considered the representative of the third generation.

5.1. Examining Early Critical Theory: A Critique of the First Two Generations and the Rise of Recognition Theory

Honneth's theory of recognition revolves around two changes he wanted to bring about in Critical Theory. The first of these is to reconstruct historical materialism. His second aim in this direction is to provide normative foundations for Critical Theory through a theory of social action. In the

following period, this theory of social action mentioned by Honneth will appear as the theory of recognition. In his first book, *Social Action and Human Nature*, written with Hans Joas, Honneth worked on the formulation of a theory of human nature in order to carry Critical Theory further. Another aim of the two thinkers in this book is to put forward a philosophical anthropology that will develop Karl Marx's claim in *The German Ideology*, which is based on the statement conditions create people as well as people create conditions (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 62). In this context, Honneth emphasises the last part of Marx's statement, namely how people create conditions, in other words, how they shape history (Farr, 2011, p. 486).

From this viewpoint, Honneth's objective is to expand Marx's understanding of the self and world-constituting praxis while establishing normative grounds for Critical Theory. Consequently, Honneth aligned with Habermas and, as noted by Farr, accomplished both objectives simultaneously through the advancement of his theory. Honneth and Habermas contend that while Marx's philosophy offers insights that could inform a potential theory of human communication and interaction, it remains largely unexploited. Instead of capitalizing on these aspects of his theory, Marx opted to simplify all human activity to the labor process. Honneth asserts that early theorists of the Frankfurt School perpetuated this error (Farr, 2011, p. 486).

5.1.1. Critiquing the Frankfurt School's Legacy: Axel Honneth's Perspective on Previous Generations

In their initial work, Adorno and Horkheimer adhered to the Marxist conviction that the proletariat will serve as the historical catalyst for human liberation. In their later time, however, with an increasing awareness of the nature of existing communism, Adorno, in particular, began to depict a more dismal view of human emancipation (Thompson, 2015, p. 176). However, Honneth argues that the aspects he found problematic in Marx were also internalised by early critical theorists, notably Horkheimer and Adorno. He attributes this to the fact that these thinkers were influenced by Marx's limited critique of the labour-economy relationship. Honneth explains this by the fact that his predecessors, especially the first generation of thinkers, maintained a comprehensive philosophy of history that linked human history and action to the activity of production, that is, to the limited view that scientific knowledge emerged as a result of man's control and domination of nature (Farr, 2011, p. 486).

These diagnoses of modern life appear in Horkheimer's essay "Traditional and Critical Theory" and take on a more pessimistic character in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which he wrote with Adorno. The aforementioned

work is inspired by Max Weber's idea of the iron cage of rationality¹²; in other words, the idea of people finding themselves trapped in a society under total domination and is shaped around the idea that man's endeavour to dominate nature turns into an endeavour to dominate man over man (Weber, 2001, p. 123). However, this structure ignores the most fundamental principle of Critical Theory, namely the duty of to offer an emancipatory prescription for problematic structures in society, and almost undermines this emancipatory aspect. This paradigm critiques Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory for inadequately considering the struggles and social actions of individuals and social groups. Farr asserts that the outcome is a form of political paralysis that precludes emancipation (Farr, 2011, pp. 486–487). Thus, according to Honneth, the first generation, had failed to draw certain conclusions about the formation of the conditions for self-realisation. For Honneth, the vast majority of his predecessors failed to establish normative criteria for ethics by dwelling too much on purely negative social critiques of society, technology, media and tyranny (Honneth, 2007, p. 34).

Honneth argues in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* that the first generation's criticism of society is so intense that they forget that societies are made up of individuals who long to be recognised and respected, and that unless we understand this individual aspect of society, we will only find solutions to society's problems that lack ethical foundations. Thus, Honneth offers a criticism and at the same time a solution to Critical Theory's main deficiency by stating that the moral experiences of individuals who are not respected, and therefore not recognized, are rooted in social reality. The origins of social communication relations are also grounded in this same social reality (Honneth, 2007, pp. 63–69). Again Honneth, in his 1992 book *Moral Development and Social Struggle: Hegel's Early Social-Philosophical Doctrines*, emphasises the deficiency in the Critical Theory, pointing out that Horkheimer, Marcuse and even Sartre were aware that moral conflicts could also ignite social struggle before the theory, but they ignored this in the construction of their theories. Consequently, critical analyses cannot solely be regarded as a reflexive component of social interaction and conflicts, in which the need for recognition is a factor. According to Honneth, critical social theory cannot afford to be categorically blind in today's world, where all kinds of social conflicts are going on in every corner with the desire for legal, social and cultural recognition. Honneth argues that it is only by

¹² This concept is referred to as "stahlhartes Gehäuse" in Weber's *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated into English as "iron cage" by Talcott Parsons in 1930, there are also arguments that the concept should be translated as "shell as hard as steel" in a direct translation. For detailed information and discussions, see. (Baehr, 2001)

recalling Hegel's early work that it is possible to uncover the moral logic that unites all these conflicts and contestations (Honneth, 1992, pp. 214–215).

6. Axel Honneth and Jürgen Habermas: The Dialogue Shaping Recognition Theory in Critical Theory

Honneth contends that, without its constraints, Habermas succeeded in offering a more extensive theory about the conflict between social groupings and strategic agents. In contrast to his predecessors, Habermas endeavoured to identify novel methods for substantiating a modicum of hope over the potential for a more liberated future. He aimed to achieve this by formulating a theory of "communicative rationality" that intended to provide universally true moral assertions based on the frameworks of human communication. Habermas' theory, emphasizing intersubjective processes of self-formative socialization, informed Honneth's theory of recognition and the endeavour to reconstitute Critical Theory (Farr, 2011, p. 487).

According to Honneth, the theory of communicative action has re-established access to the emancipatory field of action (Honneth, 2007, p. 67). This approach is no longer just a negative critique, but offers a robust alternative in which individuals free themselves from existing forms of domination and liberate themselves from social pathologies through dialogue. The social process by which the linguistic rules of communicative agreement are determined, which Habermas calls communicative rationalisation, is important here. Although it is the right approach to proceed through dialogue to produce good policies that will enable us to overcome and correct social pathologies, Honneth argues that Habermas did not identify empirical experiences, attitudes and phenomena in his analysis that would have a basis in social reality. However, according to Honneth, Habermas' theory is a universal theory to the extent that it ignores the moral experiences of individuals (Honneth, 2007, pp. 69–70). For this reason, Honneth argues that language rules or theories of language cannot be normative prerequisites for social interaction, but must be included in the theory of recognition.

Honneth claims that if we open the pages of history and sociological studies, we will find behind the protests and resistance of the social underclasses the idea and experience that their notions of justice have been violated (Honneth, 2007, p. 71). The normative basis of such notions of justice consists of the expectation of respect for the dignity, honour and personal integrity of the individual. In the light of all this, it is possible to see the acquisition of social recognition as a precondition for communicative action. Honneth argues that in this context all subjects communicate with each other in the mutual expectation of being recognised as moral individuals and that their social achievements will not be ignored (Honneth, 2007, p. 71). To put it another way, the recognition of people's dignity, honour, personal integrity and moral individuality is a fundamental prerequisite for dialogue to work. In

short, social recognition is a normative expectation before entering into dialogue, and if a person is deprived of this recognition, Honneth sees this as social disregard, which carries with it the threat of loss of personhood. According to Honneth, this model links social interaction and moral experience and bridges the theoretical gap opened by Habermas. Recognition here means the acknowledgement of uniqueness and difference, not forgetting the role of this acknowledgement in self-realisation. Through this acknowledgement, people reach each other in a human, not instrumental, way.

The birth of recognition theory in critical theory is rooted in the critical philosophy of the preceding generation, particularly that of Habermas, while simultaneously serving as a critique of that philosophy. Timo Jütten asserts that recognition theory signifies a paradigm change within the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Jütten, 2018, p. 82). The theory finds its origins in Habermas's turn from philosophy towards the intersubjective grounding of social criticism, which he refers to as the philosophy of consciousness (*Bewusstseinsphilosophie*), but differs from Habermas's theory of communicative action and discourse ethics. According to Jütten, recognition theory goes beyond linguistically mediated communication and focuses on relations of recognition as a dynamic conceptualisation of the historical social struggle for equal rights in the pursuit of common goals. In this context, recognition theory assists critical theorists in evaluating societal changes that do not establish recognition relations conducive to self-realization (Jütten, 2018, p. 82).

Habermas views recognition as rational behaviour within argumentative exchanges, where the other is seen as free and equal. Honneth, however, draws on developmental psychology and sociology, often referencing Hegel. He emphasizes the concrete social process of contestation, exclusion, and recognition within the contexts of love, morality, and law. For Honneth, the struggle for recognition is a key to theorising social movements and social processes, and emancipation is multi-faceted. This struggle cannot always be recognised as an immanent rational process (Gordon et al., 2018, p. xviii).

According to Ted Fleming, Honneth's work on the theory of recognition is important both for furthering Critical Theory and for rethinking the relationship between "structure and agency"¹³. Honneth elaborates on Habermas' and other critical theorists' assertion that human growth necessitates an intersubjective context by highlighting the fundamental

¹³ There is an ongoing debate in the social sciences as to whether structure or agency takes precedence in shaping human behaviour. Structure is defined as a recurring arrangement that influences the options and opportunities available, while agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act freely and make choices. (Barker, 2003, p. 448)

importance of recognition and respect in this process. While respect occupies a pivotal role in Habermas' theory of communicative action, where disruptions in communication are regarded as forms of exclusion, Honneth posits that the necessity and want for recognition supersedes communication (Fleming, 2016, p. 14). In short, although Habermas does not think that the theory of recognition causes a paradigm shift from his own work, for Honneth, disrespect has a different structure from the disorder in communication and the desire for recognition has a different structure from communication. In regard to the notion of respect, one could assert that Honneth's theory of recognition is less grounded in cognitive rationality than Habermas' theory of communicative activity. In this context, Honneth contends that Critical Theory should concentrate on a term that is unequivocally subjective, non-economic, psychological, and cultural in nature (Alexander & Lara, 1996, p. 129). In this context, Honneth shifts the focus of Critical Theory to "the grounding of normative and theoretical justifications of struggles for social recognition of the world on the formation of personal identity" (Zurn, 2000, p. 115). The concept and theory that will realise the change of focus Honneth wishes to see in Critical Theory is "recognition" and, unlike Habermas, the central concept that determines the thinker's theory is not communication but recognition. Honneth thus locates the motivation for the emancipatory structure of Critical Theory in the sphere of activity of ordinary human experience. In sum, the communicative turn of Habermas in the second generation evolves into a turn towards recognition with Honneth in the third generation (Zurn, 2015, p. 262). After all, according to Honneth, Habermas in a way ignores the approaches of Adorno and Horkheimer, which leads to the theoretical and political eclipse we have already mentioned. Honneth argues in *The Critique of Power* that the distinction between the normative economic and administrative organisation of action and the normative but power-independent communication sphere of the lifeworld (Lebenswelt) distances Critical Theory from its emancipatory aspect. In short, Honneth argues that in a structure where the lifeworld consists of relations of power and domination, the system cannot be free of norms (Farr, 2011, p. 487).

7. CONCLUSION

7.1. The Evolving Legacy of Critical Theory and the Dialogue on Recognition

This article has traced the intellectual journey of the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory, charting its course from its origins, through its significant transformations, to the intergenerational dialogues that continue to shape its trajectory. The primary aim of this tradition has consistently been the philosophical analysis and critique of the social pathologies engendered by modern capitalist societies, with the ultimate goal of human emancipation.

The intellectual lineage of the Frankfurt School is rich and complex, deeply influenced by key thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx, as well as by psychoanalysis and Weberian critiques of rationalization. The first generation, including Horkheimer and Adorno, offered a powerful, albeit pessimistic, critique of modernity and domination, profoundly shaped by their experiences with fascism and the culture industry in capitalist America. The second generation, led by Jürgen Habermas, marked a significant shift with the development of the theory of communicative action, moving the focus from a critique of instrumental reason to the emancipatory potential inherent in intersubjective communication.

This paper has focused significantly on the contributions of the third generation, particularly Axel Honneth and his theory of recognition. Honneth's work provides a crucial response to the perceived shortcomings of his predecessors. He addresses the pessimism of the first generation and the formal, procedural nature of Habermas's theory by grounding Critical Theory in the moral experiences of individuals. For Honneth, the "struggle for recognition" is the central moral grammar of social conflicts, revealing the deeply felt injuries of disrespect and the drive for self-realization through relations of love, rights, and solidarity. By centering the intersubjective need for recognition, Honneth provides a new normative foundation for Critical Theory, one that is attuned to the diverse social and political movements of our time.

However, to fully appreciate the academic impact of Honneth's contribution, it is important to acknowledge the critical discussions it has generated. A significant line of critique, most prominently articulated by Nancy Fraser, argues that the focus on recognition can overshadow the persistent problems of economic inequality and maldistribution. Fraser contends that a "culturalist" turn risks displacing the materialist critique of capitalism that was central to earlier Frankfurt School thinkers. She proposes a "perspectival dualism," insisting that struggles for recognition and struggles for redistribution must be seen as analytically distinct yet mutually intertwined dimensions of justice.

Another point of debate concerns the theory's ability to adequately address deeply entrenched structures of power. Critics question whether a framework rooted in intersubjective psychology and moral feelings can fully account for systemic forms of domination that are not always experienced as personal disrespect but are embedded in impersonal economic and bureaucratic systems. This critique suggests that the focus on the "moral grammar" of conflict might not fully capture the strategic, power-oriented nature of many social struggles.

Finally, some scholars have raised questions about the theory's capacity to normatively distinguish between different types of struggles for

recognition. If the motivation for social conflict is the experience of disrespect, the theory might face challenges in differentiating between emancipatory movements and those that seek recognition for identities or practices that could be considered exclusionary or regressive.

These critical perspectives do not diminish the significance of Honneth's work. On the contrary, they demonstrate its vitality and its central place in contemporary social and political thought. By re-establishing a normative foundation for Critical Theory based on the universal human need for recognition, Axel Honneth has not only revitalized the Frankfurt School tradition but has also opened up new and essential avenues for dialogue. The ongoing debate surrounding his theory ensures that Critical Theory remains a dynamic, self-reflexive, and indispensable tool for understanding and challenging the pathologies of our time, thus powerfully continuing its intellectual and emancipatory legacy.

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