

2. The Critique of Instrumental Reason

The critique of instrumental reason understands itself as a critique of reification that takes up Lukacs' Weber reception without accepting the implications of his objectivistic philosophy of his-tory (which were merely alluded to above.)¹ In attempting this, Horkheimer and Adorno get ensnared in their own difficulties. There is something to be learned from these problems; indeed they furnish us with reasons for a change of paradigm within social theory. I shall begin this section with (A) a sketch of how Horkheimer and Adorno, borrowing from Lukacs, transform Weber's rationalization thesis.² The version in which Lukacs put forward the theory of reification stood contradicted by the failure of the revolution and the unforeseen integrative accomplishments of advanced capitalist societies. (B) It can also be criticized theoretically for its affirmative ties to Hegel's objective idealism. Thus Horkheimer and Adorno see themselves forced (C) to sink the foundations of the reification critique still deeper and to expand instrumental reason into a category of the world-historical process of civilization as a whole, that is, to project the process of reification back behind the capitalist beginnings of the modern age into the very beginnings of hominization. With this, however (D), the contours of the concept of reason are in danger of becoming blurred. On the one hand, the theory takes on features of a rather traditional "contemplation" that renounces its relations to practice; at the same time, it cedes to art the competence to represent a reason that is now appealed to only indirectly. The aporias of the negative-dialectical self-transcendence of philosophical thought give rise to the question (E), whether this situation is not merely the consequence of an approach that remains rooted in the philosophy of consciousness, fixated on the relation of subjectivity and self-preservation.

A. —As Helmut Dubiel has shown,³ three historical experiences were decisive above all others for the development of critical theory; all three experiences converged in the disappointment of revolutionary expectations. The Soviet development confirmed by and large Weber's prognosis of an accelerated bureaucratiza-

((367))

tion; and the Stalinist practice provided a bloody confirmation of Rosa Luxemburg's critique of the Leninist theory of organization and its historico-objectivistic foundations. Fascism demonstrated the ability of advanced capitalist societies to respond in critical situations to the danger of revolutionary change by restructuring the political system and its capacity to absorb the opposition of organized labor. Finally, developments in the United States showed in another way the integrating powers of capitalism: without open repression, mass culture bound the consciousness of the broad masses to the imperatives of the status quo. The Soviet-Russian perversion of the humane content of revolutionary socialism, the collapse of the social-revolutionary labor movement in all industrial societies, and the socially integrative accomplishments of a rationalization that had penetrated into cultural reproduction—these were the basic experiences that Horkheimer and Adorno attempted to work through theoretically in the early 1940s. They stand in contrast to the central assumptions of the theory of reification that Lukacs had put forward in the early 1920s.

Marx regarded the productive forces unleashed by capitalism as an objective presupposition for overcoming it; he was thinking here primarily of increases in productivity brought about through scientific-technical progress, qualification of labor power, and improved organization of the labor process. Among the productive forces that were to come into "contradiction" with the relations of production, he also included, of course, the subjective potential of workers insofar as this found expression (not merely in productive activity but also) in critical-revolutionary activity. Capitalism, Marx assumed, would create not only the objective conditions, but also the "essential subjective preconditions for the self-emancipation of the proletariat."⁴ Lukacs holds fundamentally the same position, but he revises Marx's assessment of modern science. It is true that the sciences are increasingly interconnected with the development of productivity by way of technical progress; however, with the formation of a scientific self-understanding, which identifies the limits of objectivating knowledge with the limits of knowledge as such, the sciences simultaneously take on an ideological role. The positivistically narrowed conception of science is a particular expression of those general tendencies toward reification that Lukacs is criticizing. This is the start of that line of argument which Horkheimer and Adorno (and, in a more pronounced way, Marcuse)⁵ take so far

((368))

that the scientific-technical forces of production appear to them to merge with the relations of production and to lose entirely their power to burst the system. The rationalized world contracts to a "false" totality.

In contrast to this, Lukacs insists that the "seemingly complete" rationalization of the world, though it "penetrates to the very depths of man's physical and psychic nature," runs up against an inner limit—it is limited "by the formal character of its own rationality."⁶ Thus Lukacs counts on there being some reservation within the subjective nature of human beings that is resistant to reification. Precisely because the individual worker is forced to split off his labor power—as a function—from his total personality and to objectivate it as a commodity—as something that is literally alienable, saleable—his now abstract, empty subjectivity is roused to resistance: "In virtue of the split between objectivity and subjectivity that arises within human beings who objectivate themselves as commodities, the situation is one of which they can also become conscious."⁷ This assertion is implicitly based on Hegel, who construed the self-movement of the spirit as a logical necessity in a specific sense. If we drop this presupposition and regard Lukacs' statement as an empirical one, then we obviously need other grounds to make it plausible that the individual wage laborer will rise above his role as an object, that the proletariat as a whole will develop a consciousness with which and in which the self-exposure of a society based on commodity production can be achieved. Lukacs merely assures us that "while the process by which the worker is reified and becomes a commodity—so long as he does not consciously offer resistance to it—dehumanizes him and cripples and atrophies his 'soul,' it remains true that precisely his human nature is not changed into a commodity. He can, therefore, inwardly objectivate himself completely against this existence of his."⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno, who no longer trust in the Hegelian logic just as it is, contest this assertion on empirical grounds. Because they hold to the theory of reification, they have to explain the historical experiences that so clearly speak for the fact that the subjective nature of the masses was sucked into the whirl of societal rationalization without offering resistance and that it accelerated rather than retarded this process.

They develop theories of fascism and of mass culture which deal with the socio-psychological aspects of a deformation that penetrates into the deepest regions of subjectivity and takes hold

((369))

of the motivational foundations of the personality, which explains cultural reproduction from the perspective of reification. Whereas the theory of mass culture⁹ starts from the view that the commodity form takes hold of culture too—and thus has a tendency to take over all of the functions of human beings—the theory of fascism¹⁰ involves a deliberate refunctionalization (that is, one intended by political elites) of the resistance that subjective nature opposes to rationalization. Horkheimer interprets the increasingly shrill discontent within the culture as a rebellion of subjective nature against reification, as a "revolt of nature": "The more loudly the idea of rationality is proclaimed and acknowledged, the stronger is the growth in the minds of people of conscious or unconscious resentment against civilization and its agency within the individual, the ego!" Horkheimer already has in view the phenomena that have since been thematized by Foucault, Laing, Basaglia and others.¹²

The socio-psychological costs of a rationalization restricted to the cognitive-instrumental dimension—costs that are externalized by society and shifted to individuals—appear in different guises, ranging from clinically treated mental illnesses through neuroses, phenomena of addiction, psychosomatic disturbances, educational and motivational problems, to the protest actions of aesthetically inspired countercultures, religious youth sects, and marginal criminal groups (now also including anarchistic terrorism). Horkheimer interprets fascism as a successful refunctionalization, as a utilization of the revolt of inner nature on behalf of the societal rationalization against which it is directed. In fascism

rationality has reached a point at which it is no longer satisfied with simply repressing nature; rationality now exploits nature by incorporating into its own system the rebellious potentialities of nature. The Nazis manipulated the suppressed desires of the German people. When the Nazis and their industrial and military backers launched their movement, they had to enlist the masses, whose material interests were not theirs. They appealed to the backward strata doomed by industrial development, that is, squeezed out by the techniques of mass production. Here, among the peasants, middle-class artisans, retailers, housewives, and small manufacturers, were to be found the protagonists

((370))

of repressed nature, the victims of instrumental reason. Without the active support of these groups, the Nazis could never have gained power.¹³

This thesis explains not only the class basis on which fascism came to power but also the historical function that it took on—namely, to accelerate processes of societal modernization in a "belated nation."¹⁴

The revolt of natural man—in the sense of the backward strata of the population—against the growth of rationality has actually furthered the formalization of reason, and has served to fetter rather than to free nature. In this light, we might describe fascism as a satanic synthesis of reason and nature—the very opposite of that reconciliation of the two poles that philosophy has always dreamed of.¹⁵

Horkheimer and Adorno investigate empirically the psychic mechanisms by means of which the revolt of inner nature is refunctionalized into strengthening the forces against which it is directed. Stimulated by the early work of Erich Fromm,¹⁶ they consider above all the ideological pattern of antisemitism and the sadomasochistic drive structure of the authoritarian character.¹⁷ (In the meantime these studies have led to inquiries into political prejudice that have moved away from psychoanalytic assumptions and abandoned relations to the conceptual apparatus of a critical theory of reification.)

The theory of mass culture deals with the less spectacular manifestations of a social integration of consciousness through the mass media. Adorno investigates the "new style of commodity fetishism" in connection with the fetishizing of works of art into cultural goods and the regression of the enjoyment of art into consumption and managed entertainment. He is convinced that the sadomasochistic character of the petit bourgeois who allows himself to be mobilized for the total state, on the one side, and "those who accept present-day mass art," on the other, represent "the same thing from different sides." Lukacs had already conceded that the further the process of reification moved away from the sphere of production and the everyday experiences of the proletarian lifeworld, and the more it changed the qualitative nature of thoughts and feelings, the less accessible it became to self-reflection.¹⁸ Adorno connects up with these reflections in his work "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening."¹⁹

To be sure, exchange value establishes itself in a special way in the realm of cultural goods. For in the world of commodities this realm appears to be exempted from the power of exchange ... and it is to this illusion that cultural goods owe their exchange value ... If a commodity always combines exchange value and use value, then pure use value—the illusion of which cultural goods have to preserve in a thoroughly capitalist society—is replaced by pure exchange value, which, precisely as exchange value, deceptively takes on the function of use value. The specific fetish character of music lies in this quid pro quo; the affects directed to the exchange value create the illusion of the

unmediated, at the same time as the lack of a relation to the object belies it.... It has been asked what the cement is that holds capitalist society together. One part of the explanation may be this transfer of the use value of consumer goods to their exchange value within a total order such that every pleasure which emancipates itself from exchange value takes on subversive features. The appearance of exchange value in commodities has taken over a specific cementing function."

Adorno elucidates this statement in connection with the changed conditions of production of mass culture, the de-differentiation of the forms of cultural goods produced in standardized ways, the changed mode of reception in art enjoyment fused with entertainment, and finally the function of adapting to an everyday life put forward as paradise: "In the culture industry jovial denial takes the place of the pain that is present in ecstasy and in asceticism ... In every exhibit of the culture industry, the permanent denial imposed by civilization is once again unmistakably demonstrated to, and inflicted upon, those affected by it."²¹

I shall not go any further into this theory; it has remained of interest more in virtue of its general line of questioning than through its detailed hypotheses. Adorno adopted a culture-critical perspective that made him sceptical—and rightly so—of Benjamin's somewhat precipitous hopes for the emancipatory power of mass culture—at that time chiefly of film.²² On the other hand, as we shall see, he had no clear concept of the thoroughly am-bivalent character of social control exercised through the mass media. An analysis that starts from the commodity form assimilates the new means of mass communication to the medium of exchange value, even though the structural similarities do not extend this far. Whereas the medium of money replaces under-

((371))

((377))

reflection to the "cunning" of scientific development. Besides, this perspective was quite alien to him. Nevertheless, Horkheimer and Adorno did not consider their task to be a substantive critique of science; they did not take it upon themselves to start from the situation of the disintegration of objective reason, to follow the thread of a subjective reason externalized in its objects as it displayed itself in the practice of the most advanced sciences, to develop a "phenomenological" concept of knowledge expanded through self-reflection, in order thereby to open up one (not the only) avenue of access to a differentiated but encompassing concept of rationality.⁴⁰ Instead, they submitted subjective reason to an unrelenting critique from the ironically distanced perspective of an objective reason that had fallen irreparably into ruin.

C.—This paradoxical step was motivated, on the one hand, by the conviction that "great" philosophy, of which Hegel was the culmination and endpoint, could no longer of itself systematically develop and ground the idea of reason, the idea of a universal reconciliation of spirit and nature, and that in this respect it had perished together with metaphysical-religious worldviews. On the other hand, however, the time had passed for the realization of philosophy that was once possible, as Marx had proclaimed; as a result, philosophy remained, so to speak, the only memorial to the promise of a humane social life. In this respect, under the ruins of philosophy there lay buried the only truth from which thought could draw its negating, reification-transcending power. "Philosophy, which once appeared to have been superseded, remains alive because the moment for its realization was missed." With this sentence Negative Dialectics gets underway.⁴¹

Horkheimer and Adorno face the following problem. On the one hand, they do not agree with Lukacs' view that the seemingly complete rationalization of the world has its limit in the formal character of its own rationality; they criticize this thesis empirically, by reference to the forms of manifestation of a penetrating reification of culture and inner nature, and theoretically, by showing that even the objective idealism developed in Hegelian Marxism simply carries on the line of identity thinking and reproduces in itself the structures of reified consciousness. On the other hand, Horkheimer and Adorno radicalize Lukacs' critique of reification. They do not consider the rationalization of the world to be only "seemingly complete"; and thus they need a conceptual

((372))

standing in language as a mechanism for coordinating action, the media of mass communication remain dependent on achieving understanding in language. They technically amplify linguistic communication, bridge over spatial and temporal distances, multiply possibilities of communication and intensify the network of communicative action, without, however, uncoupling action orientations from lifeworld contexts as such. Of course, this pronounced expansion of communication potential is neutralized for the present by organizational forms that establish one-way—that is, nonreversible—communication flows. But whether a mass culture tailored to mass media develops into a regressive integration of consciousness depends in the first instance on whether "communication (brings about) the assimilation of human beings by isolating them"²³ and not on whether the laws of the market exert an increasingly decisive influence on cultural production itself.²⁴

B. —Horkheimer and Adorno radicalize Lukacs' theory of reification in socio-psychological terms; they do this so as to explain the stability of advanced capitalist societies without having to give up the approach of the critique of commodity fetishism. Their theory is supposed to explain why capitalism simultaneously heightens the forces of production and immobilizes the forces of subjective resistance. Lukacs had assumed the validity of a logic according to which the process of the reification of consciousness had to lead to its own overcoming [Selbstaufhebung] in proletarian class consciousness. Horkheimer and Adorno put Hegel's logic to one side and try to explain empirically the evidence that refutes this prediction. They are in agreement with Weber—the "arch-positivist"—on one point: Objective reason cannot be restored, not even in dialectical concepts.

In his critique of Hegel, which points beyond Lukacs, Adorno takes up and sharpens one of Lukacs' arguments. It has to do with the question of the relation between mind and matter, which Lukacs poses in the epistemological context of the "thing-in-itself" problematic. In this connection he cites a line from Emil Lask: "For subjectivity it is not self-evident but rather the whole aim of its investigations [to ascertain] the category into which logical form in general is differentiated when some determinate individual matter is to be grasped categorially—or, to put it another way, [to ascertain] the individual matter that everywhere constitutes the material domain of individual categories."²⁵

((373))

Whereas Lukacs assumes that this problem arises only for thinking at the level of the understanding, and that it can be resolved by way of a dialectical mediation of form and content, Adorno sees the same problem turn up again at the heart of dialectical thought.²⁶ All conceptual thought that stands apart from mere intuition—and this includes dialectical thought—proceeds by way of identification and betrays the utopian element in cognition. "That element of truth encountered through concepts, beyond their abstract compass, can show itself only in that which is suppressed, despised and discarded by concepts. It is the utopian hope of cognition to open up what is conceptless by means of concepts without (thereby) assimilating it to them. Such a notion of dialectic raises doubts as to its possibility."²⁷

There is no need to discuss here how Adorno works out these programmatic ideas—or rather displays them in their unworkability—in the form of a "negative dialectics."²⁶ In the present context, what is important is the argument with which he rejects—in an almost existentialist fashion—the logic of Hegel.

Cognition aims at the particular and not at the universal. It seeks its true object in the possible determination of the difference between that very particular and the universal, which it criticizes as nevertheless unavoidable. But if the mediation of the universal through the particular and of the particular through the universal is put into the abstract normal form of mediation pure and simple, then the particular has to pay—to the point of being dismissed in an authoritarian manner in the material sections of Hegel's system.²⁹

In terms of Hegel's own concepts, the dialectical reconciliation of the universal and the particular remains metaphysical because it does not give its due to what is "non-identical" in the particular.³⁰ The structure of reified consciousness continues on in the very dialectic that is offered as a means of overcoming it, because everything that is of the nature of a thing counts for it as radically evil: "Whoever wants to 'dynamize' everything that is into pure activity tends to be hostile toward the other, the alien, whose name we are reminded of, and not without good reason, in alienation, the non-identity for which not only consciousness but a reconciled humanity is to be made free."³¹

But if negative dialectics presents itself as the only possible path of reconstruction—a path that cannot be traversed discursively—

((374))

sively—how then can we explicate the idea of reconciliation in the light of which alone Adorno is able to make the shortcomings of the idealist dialectic visible? From the beginning, critical theory labored over the problem of giving an account of its own normative foundations; since Horkheimer and Adorno made their turn to the critique of instrumental reason early in the 1940s, this problem has become drastically apparent. Horkheimer first takes up two positions that react in opposite ways to the replacement of objective reason by subjective reason, to the disintegration of religion and metaphysics. In the chapter of the *Eclipse of Reason* entitled "Conflicting Panaceas," he develops a position with two fronts: one against approaches in contemporary philosophy that are oriented to the tradition and the other against scientism; these fronts have remained decisive for the intraphilosophical arguments of critical theory until the positivism debate. The actual situation to which Horkheimer refers is a controversy between representatives of logical positivism and certain currents of neo-Thomism.³² Neo-Thomism stands here for any attempt to link up with Plato or Aristotle so as to renew the ontological claim of philosophy to comprehend the world as a whole, whether precritically or under the banner of objective idealism, and to put back together again metaphysically the moments of reason that separated out in the modern development of the spirit—the different aspects of validity: the true, the good, and the beautiful. "Today there is a general tendency"—and this tendency actually continues into the present³³

... to revive past theories of objective reason in order to give some philosophical foundation to the rapidly disintegrating hierarchy of generally accepted values. Along with pseudo-religious or half-scientific mind cures, spiritualism, astrology, cheap brands of past philosophies such as yoga, Buddhism, or mysticism, and popular adaptations of classical objectivistic philosophies, medieval ontologies are recommended for modern use. But the transition from objective to subjective reason was not an accident, and the process of development of ideas cannot arbitrarily at any given moment be reversed. If subjective reason in the form of enlightenment has dissolved the philosophical basis of beliefs that have been an essential part of Western culture, it has been able to do so because this basis proved to be too weak. Their revival, therefore, is completely artificial. . . The absolute becomes itself a means, objective reason a scheme for subjective purposes.³⁴

((375))

With his critique of traditional approaches Horkheimer is not, of course, placing himself on the side of logical empiricism. What he opposes to metaphysics is not at all based on positivism's false equation of science with reason. Rather, he attacks the false complementarity between a positivistic understanding of science and a metaphysics that merely elevates itself above scientific theories without contributing to our understanding of them. Horkheimer regards both neopositivism and neo-Thomism as limited truths that "try to assume a despotic role in the realm of thought."³⁵ Like traditionalism, logical empiricism has to have recourse to self-evident first principles; only it is the scientific method, the foundations of which remain unclarified, that the latter absolutizes in place of God, Nature, or Being. Positivism is unwilling to ground the identity of science and truth that it asserts. It limits itself to analyzing the procedures of established scientific practice. This may be an expression of reverence for institutionalized science; but why certain procedures may be recognized as scientific is something that requires normative justification: "To be the absolute authority, science must be justified as an intellectual principle, not merely deduced from empirical procedures and then made absolute as truth on the basis of dogmatic criteria of scientific success."³⁶

One is naturally anxious to hear Horkheimer's explanation of the standard on which he bases his own critique of the "limited truth" of scientism. Either he has to take this standard from a theory that elucidates the foundations of the modern natural, social, and cultural sciences within the horizon of more encompassing concepts of truth and knowledge; or, supposing there is not—or not yet—any such theory, he has to enter upon the rocky path of immanent critique of science and obtain the desired standard from a self-reflection that reaches down into the lifeworld foundations, the structures of action and the contexts of discovery, underlying scientific theory-construction or objectivating thought in general.³⁷ In respect to these alternatives, the following passage is unclear:

Modern science, as positivists understand it, refers essentially to statements about facts, and therefore presupposes the reification of life in general and of perception in particular. It looks upon the world as a world of facts and things and fails to connect the transformation of the world into facts and things with the social process. The very concept of "fact"

((376))

is a product—a product of social alienation; in it, the abstract object of exchange is conceived as a model for all objects of experience in the given category. The task of critical reflection is not merely to understand the various facts in their historical development—and even this has immeasurably wider implications than positivist scholasticism has ever dreamed of—but also to see through the notion of fact itself, in its development and therefore in its relativity. The so-called facts ascertained by quantitative methods, which the positivists are inclined to regard as the only scientific ones, are often surface phenomena that obscure rather than disclose the underlying reality. A concept cannot be accepted as the measure of truth if the ideal of truth that it serves in itself presupposes social processes that thinking cannot accept as ultimates."

On the one hand, the reminiscence of Lukacs' critique of scientific objectivism is clear; on the other hand, we know that Horkheimer does not want to accept without reservation the basic assumptions of the Hegelian (or Hegelian-Marxist) critique of Kant. He agrees with Weber that the split between theoretical and practical reason, the splitting up of rationality into the validity aspects of truth, normative rightness, and authenticity or sincerity, cannot be undone by having recourse—however dialectical or materialistic—to the lost totality, to the whole of what is.

Thus the appeal to critical reflection cannot be understood as a disguised call to retreat to a Marxistically restored Hegel; it can only be understood as a first step toward a self-reflection of the sciences—which has since actually been carried out. For one thing, the self-criticism developed within the framework of the analytic theory of science has, with admirable consistency, led to the—ambiguous—positions of so-called postempiricism (Lakatos, Toulmin, Kuhn, Hesse, Feyerabend). For another, in the debate concerning the methodological foundations of the social sciences, the program of a unified science has been abandoned under the influence of phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnomethodology, linguistic philosophy—and critical theory as well—without any clear alternative coming into view.³⁹ It is by no means the case that these two lines of argument have led to an unambiguous resumption of the rationality problematic; they have left room for sceptical and, above all, relativistic conclusions (Feyerabend, Elkana). Viewed retrospectively, therefore, it does not look as if Horkheimer could safely have left critical

((377))

reflection to the "cunning" of scientific development. Besides, this perspective was quite alien to him. Nevertheless, Horkheimer and Adorno did not consider their task to be a substantive critique of science; they did not take it upon themselves to start from the situation of the disintegration of objective reason, to follow the thread of a subjective reason externalized in its objects as it displayed itself in the practice of the most advanced sciences, to develop a "phenomenological" concept of knowledge expanded through self-reflection, in order thereby to open up one (not the only) avenue of access to a differentiated but encompassing concept of rationality.⁴⁰ Instead, they submitted subjective reason to an unrelenting critique from the ironically distanced perspective of an objective reason that had fallen irreparably into ruin.

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