

## Genesis and relevance of the Frankfurt critical theory

---

Paulo Vitorino Fontes

University of the Azores

Centre for Humanistic Studies

Rua da Mãe de Deus, 9500-321, Ponta Delgada, Portugal

Email: paulo.v.fontes@uac.pt

### **Abstract:**

In the course of this work, it is important first of all, to explore the thematic texture of the Frankfurt School from a historical perspective, without claiming to present a complete balance, but revealing its originality and its fundamental ideas. We intend to explore this critical movement and present the various reflexive stages that allow clarifying the conceptual premises of a possible critical theory. We intend to revisit and highlight the philosophical, sociological and political meaning of this reality called the Frankfurt School and bring to light its main contents and priorities that continue to be the subject of debate today.

**Keywords:** theory, reason, criticism, emancipation, Frankfurt School

### **Introduction**

Understanding the originality and the fundamental ideas of the Frankfurt School is essential in the task we set ourselves. It is important to question the philosophical, sociological and political meaning of this reality called Frankfurt School. Not forgetting that the School is not exhausted in these categories, it is important to highlight the originality of the Frankfurt project, in elaborating a critical theory of society which gave rise to a vast programme of interdisciplinary work, deeply marking the course of the social sciences not only in the Marxist strand, which was its original root, but also in the general panorama of contemporary social and political theory.

Our main objective is to revisit and highlight the main conceptions and ideas that led to the implementation of German critical theory and its inscription in the programme of philosophy, the social sciences, art and aesthetics, and, in general, in the current of thought. Therefore, we will revisit this school of social and political thought, which is still able to inspire us today, supporting our research in various authors and authors who continue to develop critical theory to this day.

### **The foundation of the Frankfurt School**

The Frankfurt School would be the current that took shape in Frankfurt through a decree of the Ministry of Education, dated February 3, 1923, as a result of an agreement between the ministry and the *Gesellschaft fur Sozialforschung* (Society for Social Research) which enabled the creation of the *Institut fur Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research), as Paul-Laurent Assoun (1989, 11) states.

The origin of the Institute, preceding this date, is the initiative of Felix J. Weil, the son of a wealthy businessman and a doctor of political science, who organised during the summer of 1922 the *Erste Marxistische Arbeitswoche* (First Marxist Working Week) in Ilmenau (Thuringe), with the participation of Lukács, Korsch, Pollock and Wittfogel, with the aim of fostering genuine Marxism. From this idea, benefiting from a donation from Hermann Weil and a contract with the Ministry of Education, the Institute for Social Research was born. Its first appointed director was Kurt A. Gerlach, who died in the same year and was replaced by Carl Grumberg, who held the post until 1930. The journal *Archiv* was launched, which in 1932 was replaced by *Zeitschrift*. The headquarters of the Institute were at no. 17 Victoria-Allee in Frankfurt and the first branch of the Institute was set up in Geneva in 1931. In parallel, two branch offices opened in Paris.

From September 1933, the Institute for Social Research ceased to be in Frankfurt with the exile of its researchers due to Nazi persecution in World War II. The journal continued to be published in France and its main structure was in Switzerland until August 1950, when the Institute resumed its work in Frankfurt. Meanwhile, the Institute had become linked to the United States, joining Columbia University, through the proposal of Nicholas M. Butler, in 1934 and, even after the return to Frankfurt, the Institute maintained its dependence in New York (Assoun 1989, 12).

Without the Institute there would have been no school, but the school goes beyond the Institute. According to Martin Jay (1989, 14), the “notion of a specific school only developed after the Institute was forced to leave Frankfurt, and only really became the term after the Institute's return to Germany in 1950”. As the identity of this project is complex, there is an ambiguity in the early years, in which social phenomena are thought of under the influence of Hegel, Kant and Heidegger, in a mixture of philosophy and sociology. This issue only becomes clearer when Max Horkheimer assumes the leadership of the Institute in 1931 and the methodological demand is renamed social philosophy.

From the end of the 19th century, a new subject arises in Germany, under the effect of the development of social ideas, which neither sociology nor philosophy define satisfactorily. It is situated on the threshold of speculative reflection and sociological observation, influenced by ethical reflection related to the field of cultural history (*Kulturgeschichte*). Thus emerges an immense literature combining sociology, reflection on history and civilisation, inspired by various currents, such as social ideas, neo-Kantian ethics and the philosophy of values. Names like Max Weber, Max Scheler, Leopold von Wiese, Adolph Reinach, Wilhelm Sombart, Georg Simmel and Karl Jaspers should be mentioned (Assoun 1989, 13).

In the period between the two world wars, the founders of the Frankfurt School chose the name critical theory to symbolise the attempt to reconcile theory and practice, to achieve the unity of theory with empirical research and with the historical awareness of the social, political and cultural problems of a particular epoch. According to Craig Calhoun (1996, 437 e 448), they developed the programmatic conception of the potential role that critical theory can play within the self-reflexive public discourse proper to a democratic society.

The term social philosophy for Horkheimer assumes a fundamental problem when articulating the philosophical reflexivity, which is based on the requirement of the concept, with the scientific research, which is based on empirics, no longer constituting itself as a homogeneous discipline, sure of its validity, as it was considered until then. The need to theorise society and history is subject to conceptual reflection. This justifies the formal and logical precedence of philosophy over the theory of history and society. The contribution of the philosophy of the Frankfurt School is constituted by the principles of German critical theory, a process which mediates between the crisis in history and in the concept, in a stand against German idealism, which provides the starting point and the language of its own contestation (Assoun 1989, 14 e 25-26).

Horkheimer ([1932] 1974) in his writing on “Hegel et le problème de la métaphysique” proposes the refusal of the identity theory, concluded by Hegel and affirms this philosophical thesis as fundamental to the critical theory. In German idealist philosophy, from Kant to Hegel, the thesis of the identity of subject and object appears as a necessary presupposition of the existence of truth. So much so that the subject that knows itself should be infinite, according to the idealist conception, to be itself thought of as identical to the absolute. Since it was the identity of the absolute spirit and the being, the real and the rational that guaranteed the metaphysics as knowledge. Horkheimer in denying the identity, also opposed the affirmation of a true order of the world, which philosophy would have the task to present. Since for Horkheimer to deny the doctrine of identity is to reduce knowledge to a simple manifestation, conditioned by multiple aspects, the life of certain human subjects. Now, it is this denial that gives rise to German critical theory. For this new theoretical current, the affirmation of identity is no more than a pure belief, and it is necessary, at the very least, to pluralise identity. For such an undertaking it must be accepted that thinking loses the mystical sense of a union with being and is consumed in a multitude of processes, the origins and results of which differ greatly, and it is not a question of denying all metaphysics or of reducing science to positivism.

Horkheimer ([1931] 1993) in his inaugural lecture entitled: “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research”, upon taking office as director of the Frankfurt Institute in 1931, set out the question on which the Frankfurt School is based: “the question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychological development of individuals and the changes in the realm of culture” (Horkheimer [1931] 1993, 11). For the German thinker, this question is not only of current relevance, it presents itself as a contemporary version of the oldest and most important set of philosophical problems. The research project of the relations between the three processes enunciated will be above all a reformulation on the basis of the new constellation of the problem, according to the available research methods and the level of knowledge about the old question of the connection between the particular existence and the universal Reason, of reality and Idea, of life and Spirit, as defined by Horkheimer ([1931] 1993, 11-12). The author clearly states that a Critical Theory of society able to take on the complex project of reflecting on its social origins, as well as on the political possibilities of its practical

realization, can only fulfill this goal in an interdisciplinary context. The model presented to fulfill this purpose is that of a continuous dialectical interpenetration between philosophical theory and concrete scientific practice.

According to Jay ([1974] 1989), in addition to Horkheimer we should include in the first line of this School the name of Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno, which provides the theoretical alternative of the School after the period of exile. To this should be added other figures linked to the School, in different ways, but who contributed to the theoretical expansion of its principles and methods. Such as Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin and Erich Fromm, who constituted the initial nucleus. It is also worth mentioning the main collaborators of the Institute from its inception: Franz Borkenau, Henryk Grossmann, Otto Kirchheimer, Mira Komarowski, Siegfried Kracauer, Leo Lowenthal, Franz Neumann, Friedrich Pollock, Andries Sternheim, Félix Weil and Karl August Wittfogel. It is also important to mention the name of Ernst Bloch, who, starting from different principles, through the concept of utopia, went towards critical theory.

Finally, it is necessary to add the heirs of critical theory, who, not belonging to the historical group of founders, refer to critical theory in their works: this is the case of Alfred Schmidt, Oskar Negt, Karl-Otto Apel, Albrecht Wellmer, Claus Offe and, most prominent of all, Jürgen Habermas. More recently, Axel Honneth has emerged as one of the most important thinkers of the third generation of the Frankfurt School.

The Frankfurt School is thus the label that serves to mark an event (the creation of the Institute), a scientific project (entitled 'social philosophy'), an attitude (christened 'critical theory'), in short a movement or theoretical current, at once incessant and varied, formed by diverse thinking personalities. It is "an ideological phenomenon which curiously produces its own criteria of identification through its creative process" (Assoun 1989, 23).

### **The project of critical theory**

The thought of the Frankfurt School combined various influences, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, German idealist philosophy and theology, romanticism and the thinkers of the "hidden face" of the Enlightenment, such as Nietzsche. Critical theory, as a distinct project, intended to combine traditional abstract and universal philosophy with empirical and historical knowledge of the social, was inspired by Hegel and the dialogue held with him, mainly Marx, as the most important of those who tried to recover the lost critical capacity, starting from schemes of reasoning influenced by Hegel (Calhoun 1996, 448-449).

Hegel attempted to redeem the potential of the Enlightenment, his philosophical project sought to reconcile modern life, as Habermas (1990, 16) reminds us: "the first philosopher to develop a precise concept of modernity was Hegel; we must therefore go back to Hegel if we are to understand what the internal relationship between modernity and rationality means".<sup>1</sup> For Hegel, modernity was no longer one and total, there was no way back to the previous unity, the subject had to create a new social totality out of the historical circumstances of the present.

In Hegel, subjectivity was fundamental to the modern era, as was critical consciousness grounded in the tensions and contradictions of social life. Only reason could ascertain the basic changes that had distanced people from themselves, only reason could lead alienated people to realize “how the nature of each had been denied in the fragmented existence of the other” (Calhoun 1996, 449). The young Hegel in trying to reconcile freedom with social integration, points to an intersubjective solution, closer to later critical theory and not so much to the philosophy of the subject.

For Axel Honneth (2009, 31), Hegel was convinced that social pathologies should be understood as the result of the inability of societies to adequately express in institutions, practices and daily routines a potential of reason that is already latent in them. This conception leads to the general thesis that an achieved form of society is only possible if the maximum of the rationality developed in each case is preserved. For Hegel, the justification of this connection is made by the ethical premise that only the rational universal can indicate to the members of each society the guiding criteria by which they can direct their meaningful lives. According to Honneth (2009, 32), this substantial conviction is also present in the representatives of critical theory, when in their various approaches they attribute the cause of the pathologies of capitalist society to the lack of social rationality.

The Hegelian idea that a rational universal is always necessary to enable the full self-realization of the subjects within society is taken up in various definitions of the praxis of the human being: how Horkheimer's concept of “human labour”, Marcuse's idea of “aesthetic life” or Habermas's concept of communicative understanding serve as a principle to the goal of stipulating a rationality in whose developed form the measure of a rational and satisfactory integration of society is determined. It is the reference to this instance of rational praxis that allows these authors to develop their analysis of society as a diagnosis of social pathologies based on the theory of reason: deviations from the ideal that would be achieved with the social realisation of the rational universal could be described as social pathologies, since they were accompanied by a painful loss of opportunities for intersubjective self-realisation (Honneth 2009, 33).

The representatives of critical theory share with Hegel the conviction that the self-realisation of the individual is only achieved if it is combined in its ends with the self-realisation of all other members of society, through principles and purposes accepted by all. As Honneth (2009, 34) emphasises, it can be said that the idea of a rational universal includes the concept of a common good, on which the members of a society have to agree rationally in order to be able to relate their individual freedoms cooperatively.

According to Honneth (2009, 35-36), the idea of a rational universal of cooperative self-realisation shared by all members of critical theory is as critical of liberalism as it is of the current of thought called “communitarianism”. All the concepts used in critical theory articulate actions whose execution requires a higher degree of intersubjectivity than that admitted in liberalism. Critical theory presupposes a normative ideal of society that is incompatible with the individualist

principles of the liberal tradition, but which has as its orientation the idea of a cooperative self-realisation, where subjects can only achieve a fulfilled life in society if they recognise beyond their particular interests a set of shared value convictions.

In pursuing this argument, we might think that critical theory and “communitarianism” coincide in the same normative interest, but Honneth (2009, 36) reminds us that just as it is distinguished from liberalism by taking as its orientation a universal of self-realisation, it is separated from the communitarian idea in the sense that this universal is linked to reason. The main authors who form part of critical theory have never abandoned the Hegelian idea that cooperative praxis and shared values must have a rational character. The interest of this approach lies in seeing individual self-realisation linked to the assumption of a common praxis that can only be the result of the realisation of reason. The cooperative relations thus have the function of increasing social rationality.

Critical theory differs from communitarianism in the way it submits the universal, which social cooperation embodies and realises at the same time, to the coordinates of a rational grounding. Since, however different the concepts of reason used from Horkheimer to Habermas may be, they all culminate in the final idea that the consecration of the liberating praxis of cooperation will not be realised by affective attachment, nor by feelings of belonging or coincidence, but by rational understanding. The ideal of society shared by all members of German critical theory can no longer be explained in the philosophical language of Hegel, but must be illustrated through a sociological analysis capable of explaining the process of the pathological formation of reason (Honneth 2009, 36-37).

Other thinkers, influenced by Hegel, tried to recover the lost critical capacity. Karl Marx stood out as the most striking among them. In the first chapter of *Capital* ([1867] 1996) one can verify Marx's radical critique of the way in which the historically unique categories created of capital - labour, commodity and value - ended up imposing themselves as almost natural and even dominating in human life. “The reified categories of capital transform qualitatively differentiated human activity into oppressive uniformities and identities” (Calhoun 1996, 449).

The reification of categories was the starting point of Georg Lukács' critique, as an extension of Marxist critique. Lukács ([1922] 2003) devoted special importance to overcoming reification<sup>2</sup>, summoning aesthetic criteria to define unreified life, similar to what the first Marx had done by drawing on the idea of aesthetic unity. Although he shared with the young Hegel the attempt to conceptualise the absolute creativity of the human being on the basis of the example of art, Marx expanded the concept in a more general analysis of labour (Calhoun 1996, 449).

The pioneers of the Frankfurt School further developed this strand of critical theory, maintaining the central place accorded to aesthetics. Together with the influence of Max Weber's analysis of bureaucracy as a finished form of instrumental rationality, they woke up against the danger of a totally administered society. These authors, according to Calhoun (1996, 450-451), questioned the traditional philosophy of individual consciousness and the absolute

identity of the cognising individual, clearly evident in Descartes' "I think: therefore I am". Under the influence of various authors, they considered the individual as a social being, constituted by intersubjective relations with others. A human nature which is always conceived in a historical context and which includes the search for happiness, the need for solidarity of others and natural sympathies. In this sense, according to Horkheimer ([1931] 1993), from human nature derived a form of reason implicitly critical of civilization.

The various approaches to critical theory, according to Honneth (2009, 38), with the greater or lesser influence each has of Marx, share a central premise in their analysis of capitalism: the social circumstances that constitute the pathologies of capitalist societies have the structural characteristic of veiling precisely those actions that would be the motive of a strong public critique. Critical theory has to broaden the tasks to be undertaken in the critique of society. It differs from other current approaches by connecting the critique of social anomalies with an explanation of the processes that have generally contributed to veiling them. It is necessary to complement normative critique with elements of historical explanation: when a rational universal is not found, which constitutes the social pathology of the present, the historical process of the deformation of reason has to be causally explained in order to make it possible to understand the non-public thematisation of social anomalies (Honneth 2009, 39).

The members of the Frankfurt School, by articulating Weber's contribution with that of Marx, arrived at the shared conviction that the rational potential of human beings unfolds in historical learning processes, in which rational solutions to problems are inextricably linked to conflicts over the monopolisation of knowledge. This is why for critical theory, as Honneth (2009, 40) states, there is no doubt that the Hegelian realisation of reason must be understood as a conflictual learning process, with many stages, in which generalisable knowledge is only realised to the extent that problem solutions are improved and against the resistance of dominant groups.

Honneth (2009, 41) adds to critical theory's concept of reason the need to include new and alien, non-Western criteria so that the concept of rationality can be permanently expanded and differentiated to be able to account for the multiform character of social learning processes.

We can conclude with Honneth (2009, 41-42), that it is on the basis of the post-idealist version of the Hegelian idea of the realisation of reason that the necessary underpinning is provided for the idea that constitutes the deepest core of the entire tradition from Horkheimer to Habermas: that the process of social rationalisation has been interrupted or conditioned in such a way by structural features that are peculiar to capitalism alone and that have as an inevitable result the pathologies that accompany the loss of a rational universal.

For Honneth (2009, 42), the conception of capitalism reached by critical theory, rather than being influenced by Marx's work, was driven by the theory of the first Lukács. It was in *History and Class Consciousness* ([1922] 2003) that Lukács suggests the idea that in the institutional reality of modern capitalism we can see a form of organisation of society that is structurally linked with a determined and restricted constitution of rationality.

For Lukács ([1922] 2003, 205), the specialisation and fragmentation of the object of labour leads the subjects to be similarly fragmented in a rational way. What leads to the objectification of their labour power in relation to the whole of their personality - which already happened through the sale of labour power as commodity - is transformed into an insurmountable quotidian, so that “the personality becomes the powerless spectator of everything that happens to its own existence, an isolated parcel integrated into a foreign system” (Lukács [1922] 2003, 205). Similarly, this defragmentation of labour and the circulation of commodities promote a form of perception in which all human beings appear as things, without sensibility and no longer linked to a community, where the important features of interaction do not deserve any attention.

In terminology more appropriate to the representations of today's world and calling upon the analysis of Honneth (2009, 42), we can present the result of Lukács' analysis as follows: with capitalism we have reached a form of praxis which leads to indifference towards the characteristics of value of other human beings; instead of relating to each other by recognising each other, the subjects perceive themselves as objects, relating according to their own interests. It should be emphasised that it is from this diagnosis of Lukács that critical theory is provided with “the categorical framework within which we can speak of an interruption or partialisation of the process of the realisation of reason” (Honneth 2009, 42). For, starting from a historical learning process, the structural coercions that Lukács demonstrates in modern capitalism present themselves as a blockage of the potential of rationality that had been accumulated since the beginning of modernity. In this way, the organization of social relations in capitalism prevents the application in praxis of the rational principles that are already available according to cognitive potentialities.

According to Honneth (2009, 44), despite the different approaches of critical theory, all present the same basic scheme of Lukács in the criticism of capitalism, only in a differentiated way and without exalting the proletariat since the philosophy of history. All the authors of critical theory perceive capitalism as a form of social organisation in which practices and schemes of thought predominate which make it impossible to make social use of a rationality already provided in historical terms. Thus, we can underline in the continuation of Honneth's reasoning that capitalism may continue to be interpreted as the institutional result of a cultural way of life or a social imaginary<sup>3</sup> where the practice of a limited and instrumental type of rationality predominates.

The main representatives of critical theory, in Honneth's analysis (2009, 45), “share the same formal diagnostic scheme of capitalism as a social condition of blocked or partialised rationality”, as well as the idea of what is the appropriate therapy: “the forces that can contribute to overcoming social pathology must come from that same reason whose realisation is being impeded by capitalism's form of social organisation”. Without underestimating its importance in critical theory as a whole, the influence of an outstanding theorist of modern thought, Sigmund Freud, reveals itself to be fundamental here.



The same importance that Hegel, Marx, Weber and Lukács have for the central content of Critical Theory should be attributed to Freud's psychoanalysis. From it they draw the central idea that social pathologies always express themselves in suffering that keeps alive the interest in the emancipatory power of reason. Just as psychoanalysis enables an intersubjective relationship, in which doctor and patient break down barriers to communication and make possible the understanding and conscious control of previously repressed motivations. Similarly, critical theory constituted an intersubjective and communicative enterprise, which was to accomplish this task in a society that was similarly incapable of recognising the true sources of its history (Calhoun 1996, 461).

### **Critical theory versus traditional theory**

The founders of the Frankfurt School aspired to differentiate critical theory from traditional theory which adopted a self-definition of what was familiar and proved incapable of looking differently, with another insight, at how the categories of consciousness were appropriated and how these at the same time constituted the world of the observable and the realizable (Calhoun 1996, 448).

Horkheimer ([1968] 2003, 231) in his fundamental text on "Traditional theory and critical theory" states:

the traditional idea of theory is abstracted from scientific activity as it is conducted at a given stage of the division of labour. It corresponds to the activity of the scientist (academic) and takes place simultaneously with all other activities in society, without the relationship between the isolated activities being directly perceived. Hence, in this idea the real social function of science does not appear, nor what theory means in human existence, but only what it is in its own, separate sphere, within which it is produced in certain historical conditions.

This view of theory, according to Horkheimer, reveals some social irresponsibility and an illusory view that theorists have of themselves. "They believe they act according to individual decisions, when even in their most complicated speculations they are exponents of an unfathomable social mechanism" ([1968] 2003, 231). This self ignorance reveals a gap at the level of both reflexivity and the demanding empirical analysis of the conditions of theorization, leading to the illusion of treating existing social conditions as if they were the only ones that could exist (Horkheimer [1968] 2003, 232-235).

The project of critical theory intended to recover for human beings the totality of their capacities, coinciding in this objective with an extension of Marxism. According to Calhoun (1996, 452-453), critical theory, relying on the young Marx, especially the first chapter of *Capital*, and on Lukács's analysis of reification, sought to show how human history had been capable of alienating human capacities. The critique operated through de-fetishisation (*defetischisierung*), through the diagnosis of inhuman relations, in which individuals were mere mediations between things, so as to make social transformation possible. Thus, in this exercise,

theory would assume centrality in revealing the form of consciousness in which the reified relations of capital were constituted and maintained.

The fight against reification and alienation is related to the critique of positivism that occupied Horkheimer and his coreligionists for much of their journeys. Positivist social science, by accepting the world as it exists and uncritically reproducing reification, through which the human content has been removed from social institutions and processes, prevents the recognition of the existence of possibilities for essential change. Through this reification it has been possible to treat aspects of humanity as if they were simply aspects of nature, to treat social facts as things, according to Durkheim's inspiration (Calhoun 1996, 453). The reification of the social world is related to the elevation of the individual subject, apparently isolated and without influence on the social organisation that integrates him or her. Critical theory intended to be different:

critical thinking (...) is not the function of an isolated individual or of a generality of individuals. It has, however, consciously as subject the determined individual, in his actual relations with other individuals and groups, and in his critical relationship with a particular class and, finally, in his interconnection, thus mediated, with the social totality and nature. (Horkheimer [1968] 2003, 243)

Taking as a starting point the individual in an asocial, ahistorical and objective perspective, "this appearance that idealism lives since Descartes, is ideology in the strict sense: the limited freedom of the bourgeois individual appears in the form of perfect freedom and autonomy" (Horkheimer [1968] 2003, 243). For this author, to think about the human being that subject and object are separated from each other is to place their identity in the future and not in the present. The method pointed out in Cartesian terminology would be that of clarification. However, in really critical thinking method does not only mean a logical process, but at the same time a concrete historical process. In the course of it, the social structure in its entirety and the relation of the theoretician to society are transformed. Thus, both the subject and the role of thought are transformed. The acceptance of the essential invariability of the relation between subject, theory and object distinguishes the Cartesian conception from any dialectical logic.

According to Calhoun (1996, 453-454), critical theory extrapolated from proletarian thought, representing a means of thinking about the social totality, which would displace the empirical and partial vision of the proletariat, resulting from its class position, to the vision of a society without classes and unstructured by injustice. Critical theory did not start from a specific social group, but from a group of individuals concerned with questioning the most basic structure of the totality of society in order to point to the possibilities of its transcendence. Considering critical theory at this time to be a form of Marxism, it already anticipated in some way the later crisis. Calhoun (1996, 454) notes, firstly, that the theory applied to the contemporary empirical situation pointed more to a new barbarism than to its transcendence. Secondly, Horkheimer avoided describing a potential revolution and engaging politically, his Marxism remaining abstract. Finally, his contribution to critical theory was more consistent in the intellectual realm than at the social level.

For this author, “at the heart of critical theory was the notion of *immanent critique*, that is, an exercise in criticism that started from within the categories of existing thought, radicalising them and showing, at various levels, their problems and unrecognised possibilities” (Calhoun 1996, 455). The activity of critique is fundamental to revealing the tensions existing between what exists and its possibilities. For the first generation of the Frankfurt School, the exercise of *immanent critique*, rooted in history, proceeded from the dialectical analysis of the contradictions internal to all epochs, all situations and social organisations.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, “social and cultural forces - science, capital and the mechanisms of political power - had become autonomous and gained the ability to dictate the course of social stability and change” (Calhoun 1996, 456). The two theorists, in expanding Marx’s argument, made evident the way in which human beings had been reduced to objects by the very forms of social relation they had created.

Other authors of the Frankfurt School, like Neumann and Pollock, were clearer in indicating concrete historical causes for the problems of that time. Causes such as the dissolution of the distinction between state and society and the erosion of the market’s autonomy in the face of the dominating force of state capitalism. Reason had been reduced to the narrow realm of the instrumental, even put at the service of the Nazi industry of death. Both Horkheimer and Adorno feared that the state of society did not make possible a truly transformative critique, or that it could ground any action that would end the dehumanizing and dangerous social order (Calhoun 1996, 456-457).

For Jay (1989, 430-450) this pessimistic stance stemmed from several factors: the subjectivisation of reason, together with *free enterprise* capitalism, seemed to empower individuals, but this was illusory. Conformism had taken the form of ideology, combined with an increasing egalisation of people, each responding only to his or her personal interest as a consumer in a world of corporate capitalism and cultural massification. Helped by modern psychology that presented adaptation and social integration as the most important individual goal, which makes it impossible to critically equate the values of existing social reality. Already no social group, including the proletariat, intellectuals and artists, seemed immune from this mortification of the competence of reason to discern the ends of social processes.

For Horkheimer and Adorno the concept of “cultural industry” assumes special importance and was first presented in the joint work: *Dialektik der Aufklärung* in 1947 and then further developed in 1963 by Adorno in the essay “Résumé über Kulturindustrie” (translated as “Résumé” on cultural industry). These authors replaced the expression “mass culture” by “cultural industry” to separate it from the meaning given by its defenders: that it is a question of a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, in a form that could take the form of popular art.

Now, for Adorno ([1947] 2009, 18) the culture industry differs from popular art in the most extreme way. “The novelty consists in the fact that the irreconcilable elements of culture, art and entertainment, are reduced to a false common denominator, the totality of the cultural industry”.

The cultural industry is still the entertainment industry. The power it exerts over consumers is mediated by entertainment, which proves hostile to anything that could be more than entertainment. The cultural industry offers the same everyday life as paradise, in which evasion is determined *a priori* as a means of returning to the starting point. Amusement fosters resignation and forgetfulness.

The cultural industry has perfidiously realised man as a generic being. Each one is only what any other can replace: a fungible thing, an exemplar. He himself as an individual is absolutely replaceable, pure nothingness, and this is what he begins to experience when, in time, he ends up losing his likeness. (Adorno [1947] 2009, 26)

In the cultural industry, individuality is apparent due essentially to the standardisation of production techniques. Individuality is only tolerated insofar as it offers no challenge to the universal. The cultural industry reveals a tendency to transform itself into a set of presuppositions that allow it to become the irrefutable prophet of the already existing.

The abolition of cultural privileges seemed not to make it possible for the masses to enter the fields that were previously barred. Liquidation and selling at a reduced price contribute to the ruin of culture itself, to the development of inhuman inconsistency (Adorno [1947] 2009, 38). The culture industry suggests as something comforting that the world is ordered in the precise way it indicates. By simulating happiness it becomes deceptive. The total consequence of the culture industry is that of an anti-enlightenment; in it enlightenment, for Horkheimer and Adorno, through the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes the deception of the masses, the vehicle that allows the subjection of consciences. Thus, for Adorno ([1972] 2001) the culture industry does not enable the formation of autonomous, independent individuals, capable of judging and consciously deciding. Since only in this way would be constituted the assumptions of a democratic society, which only emancipated individuals can maintain and develop.

In the research that Verlaina Freitas (2005) presents, the mass culture is a culture of resignation before the collective omnipotence. In the same way the individual perceives that the economic order is not commanded by his desire, that it is better to adapt to it than to go against it or remain indifferent. The symbols of the cultural industry, through its varied heroes, establish images and ideals with which people can identify. As if all this concerned something that the individual can perceive in himself.

Horkheimer, after the death of Adorno, as a balance sheet and perhaps a testament of critical theory, in his article "Pessimismus heute" (1971) defines critical theory again as that which adds to science something essential, a reflection on itself and on the existing society. Somewhat disillusioned with revolutionary hope, he points to the preservation of critical theory through the autonomy of the individual.

Already before, in the mid-1960s, when the crisis erupted and the student movements gave politics a new focus, the already ageing critical theorists of the first generation were not

prepared for this. Marcuse was the only one, of the first generation, who thought radical action possible. Despite his involvement and his mediatisation as the 'guru' of a new left, the student movement was disappointed in him. Marcuse did not see in it the heritage of the proletariat and its social positioning was not the most suitable to apprehend the crisis of the social totality, since the students despite their support for the underprivileged did not constitute an underprivileged class. Marcuse thought that the only social group capable of triggering a real revolution would be that of the "wretched of the earth", spoken of by Frantz Fanon (1968), the oppressed of the third world and the permanently unemployed of the first world. Nevertheless, the ideas of the Frankfurt theorists were incorporated into student discourses, both in Germany and in the United States (Calhoun 1996, 458-460).

### **Challenges of critical theory between history and praxis**

A second generation of theorists followed, most notably Habermas. His early work aimed to "reset the possibility of a politically meaningful critical theory" (Calhoun 1996, 460), guided by the problem of the relationship between theory and practice. He took up the debate on the methodology of the social sciences, trying to overcome the mere hermeneutic concern and the fallacy of positivist beliefs, which distinguished objective knowledge from interested human action. Habermas attempted to enable the unity between theory and practice, expanding the meaning of political practice, as the constitution of forms of joint living that allows the full realisation of human potential.

Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) aims to develop a critical assessment of forms of life and concrete epochs in their totality, without projecting norms granted by any philosophy of history. The communicative rationality of this author brings a clear evolution: it is the ambition of a critical science of society, in particular of its communicational structure, which serves as the basis from then on to constitute an evolutionary knowledge of history, created as a logic of social contradiction. This is the possibility that allows for the economy of a philosophy of history, however pessimistic. Habermas does not stop at the impasse of first generation critical theory; he opens new perspectives for the direction of praxis (Fontes 2021).

Today, the second generation exists side by side with the third generation, represented most prominently by Axel Honneth's reformulation of recognition, ethical life and the normative reconstruction of social institutions. Recognition theory, drawing on the Habermasian paradigm of communication and the Hegelian and Marxist legacy of critical theory, proposes an original model of articulation, in the form of "mutual dependence" between a normatively founded social philosophy and a sociology invited to present these norms to the verifiability of facts. Honneth critically examines the tradition of the Frankfurt School and on the basis of the achievements of sociological research develops a project, albeit primarily philosophical, for the reconstruction of a social theory capable of offering an alternative to the impasses of critical theory.

German critical theory, as we have seen, whose cultural horizon was constituted mainly in

the processing of the history of European thought from Hegel to Freud, relies on the possibility of considering history following the thread of reason. Now, according to Honneth (2009, 28), nothing will be more alien to the current generation, which has grown up with an awareness of plurality and the end of “great accounts”, than this grounding of the critique of society in the philosophy of history: the “idea of a historically active reason” with which all the representatives of the Frankfurt School agreed, from Horkheimer to Habermas, must result incomprehensible where it is no longer possible to recognise the unity of a single reason in the plurality of grounded convictions. Similarly, following Honneth’s reasoning, the broader idea that the progress of such reason is halted or interrupted by the capitalist organisation of society will also be strange, since it is no longer possible to see capitalism as a unitary system of social rationality.

The political changes of the last decades have not failed to influence the status of criticism in society. With the awareness of cultural plurality, as well as with the experience of the disparities of social emancipation movements, expectations about what criticism should and can be have been greatly reduced. As Honneth (2009, 28-29) tells us, in many cases critique is no longer conceived as a reflection of a rationality that should be anchored in the historical process. In turn, critical theory insists, in a singular way, in Honneth’s words (2009, 29),

In a mediation of theory and history in the concept of a socially active reason: the historical past must be understood in a practical sense as a process of formation whose pathological deformation by capitalism can only be overcome if those involved initiate a process of enlightenment.

It is this intellectual model of mediating theory and history that underlies the unity of German critical theory in the multiplicity of its voices: whether in the positive form of the first Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas, or in the negative form of Adorno and Benjamin, the background of the various projects is always constituted by the idea that a historical process of formation has been distorted by the social situation to such an extent that it can only be corrected in practice. According to Honneth (2009, 29), to point out the legacy of critical theory for this new century should mean rescuing from this idea of a social pathology of reason the negative charge that it nevertheless contains for current thinking; against the tendency to reduce criticism of society to an undertaking of normative, situational or local positioning, it is necessary to make comprehensible the relationship in which it finds itself with the pretensions of a reason that has been formed in history.

Critical theory, from Horkheimer to Habermas, is guided by the idea that the pathology of social rationality leads to incapacities that are expressed in the painful experience of the loss of rational faculties. For Honneth, this idea converges in the strong thesis, essentially anthropological, that the behavior of human subjects cannot be indifferent to the restriction of their rational faculties; since their self-realization is related to the assumption of the cooperative action of their reason, they cannot avoid psychic suffering for its deformation. Honneth (2009, 48) points out that “to have understood that between an intact psyche and undistorted

rationality there must be an internal relationship is perhaps the strongest impulse that critical theory received from Freud”.

The various authors who constitute the core of critical theory share the same idea that the desire for the emancipation of suffering can only be satisfied by recovering an intact rationality. For Honneth (2009, 50), this assumption carries risks, but it is the one that allows establishing a link between theory and practice, different from that given by the Marxist traditions. The defenders of critical theory do not share among themselves a set of common goals or political projects, but a set of common reasons which keep open the pathological present to the possibility of a transformation through rational understanding.

Despite the deformations or partialisations of social rationality and continuing Honneth's thinking (2009, 51), only insofar as the rational impulse of human beings to extend reason can be counted on can theory reflexively refer to a potential praxis, in which its explanations are developed with the aim of liberating from suffering. Thus, critical theory, according to Honneth, in the form in which it was developed from Horkheimer to Habermas, can only subsist in the future if it does not renounce demonstrating the existence of this kind of interest. For Honneth, the project of critical theory will only have a future if it develops a realistic concept of “emancipatory interest”, which presupposes an inextinguishable core of subjects' capacity for rational reaction to the interests of critique.

## **Conclusion**

Summoning a synthesis of the above, we highlight three main ideas that characterise the initial project, at once sociological and philosophical, of critical theory. Firstly, this project is anchored in historical materialism and in the idea of a progress-oriented historical development - from the idea that the socially effective practical forces are realised by the interests of emancipation, by reason and by the suppression of the factors that exercise domination over human beings. Theory can therefore draw on this practical example to base its view and its support for this emancipatory process on the way to a “society governed by reason”, as Max Horkheimer would put it. Secondly, he proposes to understand the “pathological” processes and the growing irrationality that hinder this dynamic through social research. Against the irrational tendencies that fragment society, critical theory adopts the viewpoint of the “totality” of social relations and provides the means capable of articulating specialized knowledge in an interdisciplinary way. Sociology will play the role of understanding the social and structural mechanisms that not only impede the implementation of this process of emancipation, but also increase domination, such as the cultural industry, monopoly capitalism, fascism and authority, among others. Thirdly, this articulation between a normative theory anchored in an effective practice of emancipation and recourse to sociology, as well as to psychoanalysis, to understand the difficulty of this process is what constitutes the background of this programme in the encounter of social philosophy with empirical research.

We believe that the set of ideas presented so far shows us the central content of the legacy of the first generation of German critical theory. As long as we do not abandon the intention of understanding critical theory as a form of reflection of a historically active reason, there is no way we can renounce the normative motif of the rational universal, the idea of the social pathology of reason, and the concept of emancipatory interest. On the other hand, we also consider that these three conceptual elements cannot be preserved today in the form in which the members of the Frankfurt School originally developed them; they all need to be reformulated in a mediation with the current state of our knowledge.

### Endnotes:

1. For an in-depth reading of Hegel see Habermas (1990) and Taylor (1975).
2. On the influence of Lukács' analysis of reification on Critical Theory see Habermas ([1981] 1999, vol. 1, ch. IV) and Honneth (2007).
3. The studies by C. Castoriadis (1983) and (1989) and by L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello ([1999] 2009) are important to deepen this context.

### References

- Adorno, Theodor. *Cultural Industry and Society*. Text selection by Jorge Mattos Brito de Almeida. Translated by Juba Elisabeth Levy et al. São Paulo: Editora Paz e Terra, (1947) 2009.
- Adorno, Theodor. *The Culture Industry, selected essays on mass culture*. London and New York: Routledge, (1972) 2001.
- Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectics of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Translation by Guido Antônio de Almeida. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, (1944) 2014.
- Assoun, Paul-Laurent. *The Frankfurt School*. Translation by Helena Cardoso. Lisbon: Dom Quixote Publications, 1989.
- Boltanski, Luc and Eva Chiapello. *The new spirit of capitalism*. Translation by Ivone Benedetti. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, (1999) 2009.
- Calhoun, Craig. "Social Theory and the Public Sphere." In B. Turner (ed.), *Social Theory*. Translation by Rui Branco. Algés: Difel, 1996. 439-479.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. *La institución imaginaria de la sociedad [The imaginary institution of society]*. Translation by Antoni Vicens. 2 Vols. Barcelona: Tusquets, 1983-1989.
- Damião de Medeiros, Pilar. "The paradoxes of German post-Auschwitz democracy: the analysis of Jürgen Habermas." In S. Rocha-Cunha (ed), *Habermas: Politics and lifeworld in the transition of the 21st century*. Évora: Instituto Superior Económico e Social, 2010.
- Fontes, Paulo. "Critique of positivism, hermeneutics, and communicative reason in Habermas." *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy*, Vol. XIII, No. 2, 2021: 443-461.
- Freitas, Verlaïne. "Cultural Industry. The narcissistic impoverishment of subjectivity". *Kriterion - Revista de Filosofia*, no. 112, Dec, 2005: 332-344.



- Habermas, Jürgen. *Teoría de la acción comunicativa. I - Racionalidad de la acción y racionalización social [Theory of communicative action. I - Rationality of action and social rationalisation]*. Translation by Manuel Jiménez Redondo. Madrid: Taurus, (1981) 1999.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Teoría de la acción comunicativa. II - Crítica de la razón funcionalista [Theory of communicative action. II - Critique of functionalist reason]*. Translation by Manuel Jiménez Redondo. Madrid: Taurus, (1981) 1992.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Philosophical Discourse on Modernity*. Translation by Ana Maria Bernardo. Lisbon: Dom Quixote Publications, 1990.
- Hinkelammert, Frank. *Crítica a la razón utópica [Critique of utopian reason]*. Costa Rica: Editorial DEI, 1990.
- Honneth, Axel. *Reificación: un estudio en la teoría del reconocimiento [Reification: a study in recognition theory]*. Translation by Graciela Calderón. Buenos Aires: Katz, 2007.
- Honneth, Axel. *Patologías de la Razón. Historia y actualidad de la Teoría Crítica [Pathologies of Reason. The History and Present of Critical Theory]*. Translation by Griselda Mársico. Madrid: Katz, 2009.
- Horkheimer, Max. "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research." In *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*. Translated by G. Frederick Hunter, Matthew S. Kramer, and John Torpey. Cambridge: MIT Press, (1931) 1974.
- Horkheimer, Max. *Les Débuts de la philosophie bourgeoise de l'histoire [The beginnings of the bourgeois philosophy of history]*. Translation by Denis Authier. Paris: Payot, (1932) 1974.
- Horkheimer, Max. *Critical Theory*. Translated by Edgardo Albizu and Carlos Luis. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, (1968) 2003.
- Horkheimer, Max. "Pessimismus heute" ["Pessimism today"]. *Schopenhauer Jahrbuch*, 1971: 1-7.
- Jay, Martin. *La Imaginación Dialéctica: Una Historia de la Escuela de Frankfurt [The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School]*. Translation by Juan Carlos Curutchet. Madrid: Taurus, (1974) 1989.
- Lukács, György. *História e consciência de classe: estudos sobre a dialética marxista [History and Class Consciousness: Studies on Marxist Dialectics]*. Translation by Rodnei Nascimento and revision by Karina Jamnini. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, (1922) 2003.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital. Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. I. Translation by Regis Barbosa and Flávio R. Kothe. São Paulo: Nova Cultural Publishers, (1867) 1996.
- Rocha-Cunha, Silvério. *O improvável que aconteceu: & outros estudos em torno de dilemas do direito e da política numa era global [The improbable that happened & other studies around dilemmas of Law and Politics in a global era]*. Ribeirão: Edições Húmus, 2008.
- Taylor, Charles. *Hegel*. Cambridge: University Press, 1975.
- Therborn, Göran. "Critical theory and the Marxist legacy of the twentieth century." In B. Turner (ed.), *Social Theory*. Translation by Rodrigo Valador. Algés: Difel. 1996. 52-81.
- Thompson, Edward Palmer. *La Formación de la classe ouvrière anglaise [The Formation of the English Working Class]*. Translation by G. Dauvé, M. Golaszewski and M.-N. Thibault. Paris: Galimard, (1963) 1988.