



What Does It Mean to Speak of the Actuality of Critical Theory?

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1. Actuality

It is one of the distinctive features of critical theory that it does not directly, and in an unmediated way, lash out at an object of capitalist society and speak of it with an objectivising approach. Critical theory understands itself as a critical and constitutive theory of knowledge. For this reason it calls into question not only the naturalness of social phenomena and is at pains to understand their historical, and produced character, but it also interrogates the validity of the insight and of the epistemological attitude towards the objects the speaker speaks about. This also applies to the relationship of critical theory to itself. To enter the terrain of critical theory accordingly means to adopt a certain stance of self-critical reflection concerning the discursive position of critical theory and of the critical intellectual. What relationship does critical theory have to its object? Is it adequate to this object? In what relation does the knowing subject stand in relation? to this theory and its object?

Its own actuality is in itself also an object on which critical theory has to reflect. It insists on being modern and up-to-date. However, this immediately gives rise to the basic question of what exactly this actuality is. Does critical theory have sufficient yardsticks for measuring this actuality? Is it not perhaps out of date in relation to itself, in relation to other theories and in relation to its social object – society? Must it renew itself, and is it able to do so?



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Critical theory represents a challenge for those intellectuals who speak in (of?) its name and who claim that what they are doing is critical theory. Therefore they must face the question of whether their insights and theoretical praxis correspond to the level of societal development. For a certain time period and region – West Germany in the 1960s – the answer to this question was almost self-evident. Nevertheless, the question of actuality has always been a point of contention. When Horkheimer and Adorno returned from exile to Germany, they had to confront Max Bense's charge that although their Hegelianising theory did survive through their California exile it was no longer up to date. After Adorno's death Claus Grossner published an article in *Die Zeit*, one of Germany's major liberal newspapers, with the title "The End of the Frankfurt School". In the same newspaper, in 1999, Peter Sloterdijk combined the suggestive assessment that critical theory is dead with his wish for its death (see Demirović, 2000). When Jürgen Habermas resumed his position at the University of Frankfurt in 1983 he repeated what he had already said in 1970: that he had no intention of "continuing the tradition of a school" (Habermas, 1983, 209). His argument rested on the distinction between theoretical motivation and actuality. He said he did not have the false ambition

"to continue dogmatically to build something whose philosophical impulses belong to another time. The thinking that has retrospectively been ascribed to the Frankfurt School was a reaction to the historical experiences of fascism and Stalinism, particularly a reaction to the unfathomable holocaust. A particular tradition of thought only remains alive if its essential purposes stand the test of time in the light of new experiences; this cannot be done without giving up outdated theoretical content. [...] Therefore, exploration and ruthless revisionism is the appropriate approach" (ibid., 209-10).

Axel Honneth similarly expressed the opinion that through the successive waves of its international reception since the 1980s the spell surrounding the old project of critical theory has gradually been broken and it has been "brought down to the realistic dimension of a theoretical initiative that can be subjected to verification". Only in the texts of peripheral figures such as Walter Benjamin, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer or also Erich Fromm, he argued, were the social-theory instruments found through which Horkheimer's formulated intention "could have been successively realised" (Honneth, 1999, 26). Thus arises a field of concepts which involve historical specificity: original philosophical impetus and essential intention on the one hand, and actuality and historically specific experience, on the other. These concepts are certainly not unproblematic ones – because a twofold arbitrariness is possible. First, one can in fact hold on to the original intention, but it may be hermeneutically misinterpreted. This raises the question of what may count as original intention and who can claim to be able to define it. Second, actuality may be defined in such a way that it denies theory any possibility of actualising theory. This is what Habermas insinuates when he argues that even the original philosophical impetus belongs to another time, in other words

is no longer actual. The assertion of a temporal distance between the original intention and the new experience thus creates a gap, which necessarily must lead to disputes between all those who see themselves in the tradition of this theory. Because everything then is up for debate: the intentions and impetus of the theory and its validity, the meaning of historical events and of actuality, finally even the character, the meaning of theory.

There is no doubt that Adorno demands actuality; he considers hatred of actuality to be reactionary; for him theory has to be up to date and fit the times. However, this means that theory has to change with time. Regarding their own theory, on the occasion of the new 1969 edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno come to the assessment that in several places the book no longer fits today's reality and that the theory can therefore not be held on to without modifying it. The truth of this theory, they argue, has an historical core and cannot be counterposed to the movement of history as an immutable truth. Alongside the concept of the historical core of truth, the concept of "historical movement" is no less important – for this concept makes it clear that events are embedded in the flow of a historical dynamic and determined by laws that only disclose themselves to theoretical inquiry. That which is considered actual is clearly in turn determined by theory. Actual is not what the daily newspapers present as actual, not even what scholarly disciplines discuss as current theory. Intellectuals who always want to be up to date have nothing to oppose to the actual and fall into opportunism and conformism. It is a part of the very logic of the social process to rationalise all relations and to force the subjects, from above, to be in sync with the times. In contrast, critical theory does not see itself as a theory of progress and of modernisation, but claims to be conservative where what is at stake is the preservation of vestiges of freedom, which it sees threatened by the tendency to total integration. The temporal nature of social relations, of institutions, of theories, is therefore examined and evaluated by theory itself. This justifies the assertion that the Humboldtian model of education, the place of philosophy in the German university, Bach's music or the poems of Eichendorff may be considered as actual. The perspective can therefore be inverted. Adorno rejects the self-righteous tribunal of the contemporary indicting the past. The new is not more actual simply because it is temporally more recent. The elders are entitled to ask those living now whether they can stand the test in the light of earlier knowledge. "This leads then to the question, ruminated ad nauseam last year, as to whether Kant is still contemporary, whether he still has something to say to us, as if he has to adapt to the intellectual needs of a humanity formed by the movies and illustrated newspapers and as if the latter does not rather have first to forswear the habits forced on it before it presumes to judge the man who wrote the treatise on eternal peace" (Adorno, 1955/1997, 324 ff.). Thus the question is not only what Kant, Marx or Adorno have to say to us, but the reverse: what do we today have to say to the pioneers of critical theory? Thus, that which has not yet been realised, which is contained in the historical movement, that which co-defines it, may also be actual. This, indirectly, is also the answer to the pressing question why despite

all the changes which the theory has been subjected to one should still hold on to critical theory and not opt for another theory. Hasn't its potential for change been exhausted? Doesn't historical change itself necessitate giving up the foundations of critical theory, including that which is characterised as its original intent? We continue to operate within this theoretical tradition, because it is a heritage and we have to respond to it. Derrida emphasised this with regard to Marx: "We are heirs – that does not mean that we have or receive this or that, that some inheritance will one day enrich us with something or other, but that the being, the essence, of what we are is first and foremost an inheritance, whether or not we want it or know it" (Derrida 1995, 93). It cannot work any other way. There is no vantage point of free theoretical choice hovering above reality. What was once thought is itself objective; it is a conceptual relation within which we are still moving historically. For this reason, I do not think it is appropriate to separate original intent and actual experience. What appears to be original intent was itself a historically specific response, followed by the further responses by the protagonists of critical theory, all of which constitutes a whole tradition of theoretical praxis. The point is to grasp the historical process that has led to this present, in which the theory and its protagonists have participated and which they have affected with their own theoretical praxis.

We find ourselves at this historical point and must, on our part, come up with answers. The efforts to define actuality in each period also represent ways to ascertain the specificity of the theoretical praxis of critical theory. In March 1969, a few months before his death, Adorno explained to a student, in the form of eight theses, what he considered to be the specific features of critical theory. First, he specified Marxism as the critical theory of society. This was to imply that Marxism could not be hypostasised, simply turned into philosophy. The philosophical questions are, Adorno continued, open and not pre-determined by a world view, for critical theory does not aim at totality but rather criticises it. Accordingly, critical theory is also not a positive materialism but aims at the "abolition of materialism as the dependency on blind material interests" (Adorno, 1969/2003, 292). Since the object itself is also a historical one whose existence is revocable, critical theory cannot be a science, as Marx and Engels (in Adorno's view) postulated, for science is, as one of the forces of production, enmeshed in the relations of production and thus itself subject to reification. From this critique flows (in Thesis 6) the assertion of a certain distance that critical theory has in relation to Marxism as a critical theory. "This is equivalent to saying that in critical theory, Marxism must reflect itself critically – without becoming macerated" (ibid.). As a self-reflection of Marxism critical theory is identical to it, but it also marks a reflected distance and difference from Marxism. Marxism recognises itself in the form of critical theory and also recognises what has proven to be wrong within its tradition. Critical theory as self-reflection does not substitute for Marxism; on the contrary, it provides it the opportunity of a reflected continuation. Without Marxism there is thus no critical theory, but Marxism can only carry forward if it changes its praxis, becomes self-reflective within critical theory and interrogates its theoretical assumptions: new

weight and importance are accorded to the dialectic and reason; the concepts of totality, of materialism and of the scientific are called into question; the subjective factor is included as a cohesive glue; the superstructure is taken into account without giving it short shrift from above. Finally, Adorno stresses the autonomy of theory; critical theory is said to be practical, to pursue the goal of a humane society, but, he concedes, currently the unity of theory and practice is not possible.

This last thesis, often uttered by Adorno, is the identification of actuality. The problem is not just the historical experience of fascism or Stalinism. For Horkheimer and Adorno the problem is “the administrated world” as a whole, including the democracies in the USA or Western Europe. However, those real historical processes point in a terrifying way to the setback which the project of human emancipation has experienced. Nevertheless, it is a preliminary failure characterising a specific historical phase, a phase in which critical theory is still possible and is not prevented by direct force, in which “at the same time nothing beyond such a theory is possible, because in this phase, without our being able to see how long it will last, the possibility of an interventionist praxis capable of seriously revolutionising reality is blocked” (Adorno, 1964/2008, 215). The point is to pursue the theory in a self-reflective way. This means to critically interrogate the concepts and the theorems of the tradition of critical theory themselves, to see whether they are sufficiently critical and can stand up to the historical development of bourgeois society – that is, to see whether possibly the theory has also contributed to failure to revolutionise society due to an inner tendency to turn into Counter-Enlightenment.

Critical theory is incorporated as theoretical praxis into the historical process; it determines actuality also through the position it takes up within and in relation to this reality. It is reflectively related to Marxism and thus to Marxism’s development, which it itself, as critical theory, influences. However, can we today take for granted a coherent historical movement, as Horkheimer and Adorno did in their time? Is such a courageous look at the historical process and the progress of emancipation possible at all? Does it make sense to relate self-reflectively to a single Marxism? Have there not been many Marxisms and many forms of self-reflection? The development of history has decentred Marxism just as it has decentred the construction of critical theory. In spite of these developments I think that it makes sense to conceive of the project of critical theory as a project in which all the Marxist, feminist and anti-racist efforts are reflected and in which they interrogate emancipatory practices and theories in order to determine where we stand today in respect to the Enlightenment and emancipation and whether our concepts of Enlightenment do not promote the project of a Counter-Enlightenment. This is no random assertion, for the effort to self-reflectively ascertain has inscribed itself into the historical process. This can be seen in the endeavour of the French philosopher Alain Badiou to reflect on the crisis of Marxism and the conditions for its continuation. Decades after Horkheimer and Adorno, he sees himself facing exactly their problem, that is, that a complete cycle of Marxism has

passed, in which Marxism was connected with the labour movement, with the unions, the parties or even with state power. In contrast, Marxism today is an expatriate, is no longer a “structuring force of real history” and continues only as reflexive thinking about its own past effectiveness. This, according to Badiou, offers an opportunity for the new beginning of a political capacity, one “that is committed to non-domination” (Badiou, 2010: 70f.). With his efforts Badiou inscribes himself into a reflected, anti-domination and delocalised continuation of Marxism, of critical theory, and awards, apparently without knowing it, undreamt of actuality to the latter. What is observable in terms of time can also be seen in terms of space. Despite their US exile, Horkheimer and Adorno were always very oriented to Germany. They took notice neither of Anglo-Saxon theoretical work nor of the critical-intellectual, emancipatory practices in the other European countries or in the countries of the Global South. But the historical constellation has fundamentally changed. Critical theory today is a global project, not limited to Germany nor to the North-Atlantic area; rather it is being pursued just as much in East Asia and in Latin America. Horkheimer and Adorno were not Eurocentric in a negative sense; they were concerned with analysing the tremendous power of the centre and of the most current stage of domination. Their goal was a reconciled humanity. From that vantage point they identified the state of the historic movement. The claim they raise with regard to our definition of actuality is nothing less than posing the question of the dialectic of Enlightenment in a global context.

2. Theory

What theory does Adorno deem adequate? How should theory, in his opinion, be constructed? During its early phase, critical theory to a certain extent followed the Marxian conception that became known as the base-superstructure model. At the base one finds the forces of production and the relations of production with the specific contradiction that the forces of production, primarily understood as technology, push property relations toward constant changes. Critical theory quite emphatically held on to this conception, that is, the assumption that the state of the forces of production would make it possible to provide for people so that the world-historical burden of self-sustaining labour might be discarded and people might draw on their right to laziness. The domination of people and nature by people might thus long ago have been rendered superfluous. However, in the phase of late capitalism all social power has been mobilised to prevent people from emancipating themselves and finding their maturity, and to keep individuals in a situation of dependency. The relations of domination and of property block, with their might, the possibilities created by the technical progress of the forces of production and convert these into destructive forces. In this reading, the classic base-superstructure scheme is linear and mechanical. Contrary to this, Horkheimer put forward, already in his 1931 inauguration speech, an innovative change of direction in order to give psychoanalysis an adequate place within social theory. He saw the individual as mediating between the economic-technical tendencies and the superstructure as the form of political and cultural commonality. The temporal

dimension tied to this mediation especially through the individual has since attracted the interest of critical theory. Individuals produce goods in unconnected, scattered private labour for an anonymous market. Whether their expenditure of labour and the product are actually wanted they will not learn until they are at the marketplace. Only then will they find out whether they can sustain themselves through their labour. This is why everybody moves in competition with everyone else and perpetually has to fear his/her own ruin and the indifference of the others, or even their Schadenfreude. The individual cannot recognise any ploy of reason that might bring all the activities together in harmony; a rational whole cannot be experienced. The suffering and death of individuals appear as senseless in a blind context. The individual can no longer see a reasonable relationship between individual interests and the commonality of the whole context. The three levels of society each have a peculiar temporal rhythm; the individual must constantly adjust to the economic-technical dynamic, which he/she can no longer process or control in his/her psychic deep structure. In order to conform to the conventions, the individual escapes into a culture that promises to create a meaningful context, although this culture is under the control of particular interests. Thus the goal of critical theory is, on the one hand, to reconstruct the mediation of the base in the superstructure and, conversely, to reveal how cultural processes in turn contribute, through specific processes of forming the individual and his/her subjectivity, to the persistence of a certain type of production and property relations characterised essentially by the appropriation of unpaid surplus labour. At the centre of the theoretical programme is thus the conviction that the whole of society may be conceptually determined in a coherent theory. This is connected with the expectation of a social life context shaped according to a reasonable plan. The Hegelian-Marxist tradition would speak of totality.

We have already seen that Horkheimer and Adorno, in their book on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have made themselves proponents of non-simultaneity. Totality implies a logically necessary cohesion, because each element of the totality is necessarily mediated with every other element. All elements are by necessity in sync with the actual totality itself. For a reasonably constructed society, as a totality the goal would be that all processes and relations would be reasonably planned and foreseeable. The totality would itself be transparent to itself and would have to be absolutely present. Every single item, and thus also individual people, would be identical with this totality. Because of this tendency of reason, Horkheimer and Adorno speak of the Enlightenment as being totalitarian (see Horkheimer, Adorno, 1947/1987, 28). It is part of the logic of this argument that precisely the realisation of the Enlightenment has to have authoritarian consequences. This holds for all social systems in which the idea of Enlightenment is pursued. For this reason, Horkheimer and Adorno could have a critical stance vis-à-vis developments both in the USA and in the Soviet Union in this regard. In the last years of his life Adorno often pointed to the consequences of this insight. Where it seems that nothing is left for thinking except to promote the hegemony of the total, he felt it was necessary to side with the particular and the concrete. "It is here that the potential of a better

arrangement of society can hibernate, which would be a society where the multitude could co-exist peacefully and without risk. Totality is not the interest of a critical theory of society such that it would want to create it” (Adorno, 1968/1972, 587).

With this argument, Adorno transforms a thesis on the history of philosophy into one of social theory, which itself has consequences also for social theory as a theory of societal totality. He criticises Marx’s theory for conceptualising society in the Hegelian tradition as a self-contained deductive system. This objection is also self-critically directed against critical theory’s early programme. To demand deductive continuity would mean that, despite all contradictions in society, something like unity prevailed. However, this is precisely not the case. A systematic social theory would deny and conceal, in its smoothness and identity, the continued existence of antagonisms. “The antagonisms continue to exist, though not directly visible or often not directly visible as contrasts of life style or as the contrasts between tremendous poverty and luxurious wealth, but they continue to exist in the form of an extreme antagonism between social power and social powerlessness” (Adorno, 1964/2008, 111). Adorno explains sociology’s failure to create a project of social theory with the fact that society, as a complex and difficult matter, resists any immediate deduction from a few concepts (*ibid.*, 45). It is against the background of this consideration that Adorno announces the question of the “form of a non-systematic theory” of society (*ibid.*, 49). This is a paradoxical formulation, as Adorno implies with it that theory cannot be systematic because there are contradictions and antagonisms with its object (society). But these antagonisms and irrationalities of society must themselves be rationally and systematically understood, because otherwise the project of a critical theory would be futile. The theory of society, he argued, must not remain a patchwork, but rather “needs to develop the irrationalities of the prevailing society out of the essence of its own rationality (1964/2008, 126). The theory of antagonistic society thus claims to be a systematic theory. However, the programmatic goal of theory in turn must not in turn contribute to the construction of a unitary object, which could be recognised in a unitary way because, as we have seen, critical theory is not about creating a totality, thus also not about creating a closed, deductive theory. This contradiction impels Adorno to look for an epistemological standpoint outside of society, and to define “society” itself as a critical and negative concept. In his understanding, society is a specific relationship including the tendency towards increasing standardisation and integration. Society, according to him, is totality, everything is connected to everything else, but this assessment is less a product of thin thinking than the “bad core of society itself: that of exchange in modern society. [...] The total coherence takes the form in which all people have to submit to the law of exchange if they do not want to perish, regardless of whether they are subjectively driven by a ‘profit motive’ or not” (Adorno, 1965/1972, 14). What I find interesting about this argument is not the oft-criticised logic of the subsumption under the law of exchange or of capital, but rather the critically relativised Hegelianism, that is, the systematic argument that society is less than the

sum of its parts and only a subordinate functional inter-relation, which nevertheless succeeds in drawing in many aspects of how humans live together, in subordinating themselves and in shaping relations as well as subjects commensurate with the logic of capital valorisation. If Adorno then invokes the hope that the “spell of society” (ibid., 19; author’s emphasis) might one day be broken, this suggests that he imagines a historical period of people living together, when there no longer is a society and no totality, but when people shape their way of living together and the way they relate to themselves and to nature through reason. This also has as a consequence that there would then be no more theory, for theory depends historically on the existence and development of its object. In the sense of a philosophy of history, social theories are not equally possible in all times and – we might add to Adorno – not equally necessary (see Adorno, 1964/2008, 44).

These reflections have their own actuality, which distinguishes them from the current discussions on social theory. Contrary to what Adorno could have guessed and had expected, the past decades have seen numerous efforts directed toward a theory of society. On the one hand, there are grand theories such as those developed by Niklas Luhmann or Jürgen Habermas. Both claim to build on the sociological tradition of Durkheim, Weber and Parsons and to be continuing that tradition through communication theory and evolution theory. Luhmann holds the view that society consists of communication. In order to gain complexity, these communications are made to fit with each other through processing them in much differentiated kinds of media. In this way, modern society is structured into differentiated functional systems. These functional systems, i.e. economy, politics or science – are each specialised in a particular communication, but they practice this globally. In other words, markets, political power or scientific truth are not bounded by nation-states but operate wherever modern society reaches. According also to Habermas, too, modern society consists of communication. But he distinguishes between communication that takes place in interactions between individuals sharing a common life world, on the one hand, and systemic communication, on the other. In the life world and in the public sphere individuals can discuss practical questions and may change their behaviour on the basis of moral insight, whereas the evolutionary advantage of the differentiation of the economic and political subsystems consists precisely in the fact that efficient and powerful action is here freed from moral justifications. In spite of big differences between these two theoretical approaches I also see a large common ground. Both theories see themselves as theories with the positive object of society. This means two things: a) a theory formation arises on the basis of the internal epistemological dynamic of the social-scientific debate and not from the dynamic of the theory’s object and the experience of social contradictions and conflicts. b) The theory is placed in society in such a way that it cannot contribute to overcoming capitalist social relations through knowledge. For Luhmann, critique is only communication inside the social system. In Habermas’s conception, critique thematizes the individual suffering which befalls people in the process of the cultural reproduction of the life-world through infringements by the bureaucracy.

On the other hand, we find discourse-analytical approaches oriented to Derrida, as that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. This approach, too, shares certain traits with Adorno. These commonalities, however, do not have to do with the claim to social theory but rather with the concepts of totality and of society. Laclau shares the view that totality is the result of temporary endeavours towards totalisation. Totality is thus also in this case less than the sum of its parts. However, Laclau tends towards a supra-historical understanding of totality, because from a discourse-analytical point of view it is unavoidable that discourses produce, again and again, totalities, that are interrelations in which all elements of meaning are so articulated within an open social space in such a way as to refer with ineluctable logic to all others. The latter does not absorb the meaning of all these moments of totality; rather, these moments transcend the totality. Society can never completely be society, cannot close itself off within a unified and positive logic; only temporarily the meaning becomes fixed into a concrete totality. This occurs through a hegemonic practice tying the elements of meaning into a chain of equivalents. Through the equivalence of all significant moments of a totality, negativity as such receives a real existence. This is the antagonism, which represents the limits of society itself, a symbol of its non-being (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1991, 180 ff.). The presence of the antagonism at the limit of society symbolises that the society cannot constitute itself completely and sustainably, even if it strives to do so. From this reflection, it follows that every hegemonic praxis seeks to produce and to sustain a totality. Those who are excluded by totalisation will in turn push to re-articulate this totality. Thus there constantly arises anew the dynamic of inclusion, the attempt to lead the totality to unity, to construct the system. But all these attempts are bound to fail. What is strikingly actual in Adorno's reflections is that he does not ascribe this dialectic, which Laclau described so forcefully, to the universal logic of the discourse, but to a historically specific form of social production. Indeed, this is about a compulsivity of modern bourgeois society that seeks to create itself as the *One*, as a unitary interrelation, while it is constitutively divided. The production of this unity is accomplished, using Adorno's expression, as integration. This integration is compulsive because it must produce unity in order to exist, but this unity itself is constantly broken up from within – i.e. not from its borders. In order to maintain this unity, a wide variety of measures are taken up using the instruments of power. They range, as Adorno depicts them, from the integration of workers, through consumer options, via the organisation of everyday life through the culture industries, the socio-technical formation of individual identities, all the way to the creation of artificial national or racialised collectivities. Adorno's concept of the negative dialectic does not imply that critical theory should advocate a production of unity. On the contrary, as has become clear, the open awareness of the failure of society should set free precisely the multiplicity of contradictions in order to change the conditions under which they become possible. Adorno's idea of this emancipatory practice is more radical than Laclau's, because for Laclau one form of totality supersedes another, as new social protagonists bring new antagonisms

into being. In contrast, Adorno argues that historically specific contradictions constitute totality. Adorno sees history up to now as rather unoriginal, as a repetition of the constraints of nature. For this reason a limited number of contradictions return again and again: the hegemonic appropriation and destruction of nature, the violence practiced against individuals with certain ascriptive identities, the exploitation of the labouring capacity of others and the disposal over their lives, racism and war. Once these contradictions are set free, the possibility for the *Open* to emerge arises, which would allow transforming the conditions so that such contradictions and totality as such will no longer have to form again. World history may still not be free of contradictions in such a future, but they and the form they take will then be so different that at present we do not even have a theory, however universalistic, to which we have access, in order to know about such future contradictions.

3. After late capitalism

If we assess the actuality of critical social theory today, many tendencies that were observed by Horkheimer and Adorno, and that led them to speak of late capitalism, continue to exist. This is particularly the case with the nuclear arms build-up to the point where there are now 23,000 warheads, which for Adorno represented the culmination of irrationality, as humanity can destroy itself many times over. Still, one ought not to deceive oneself and underestimate capitalism's capacity to transform and to react to new challenges. In recent decades we had to experience how neoliberal capitalism reorganised and reshaped societies.

Furthermore, what for Adorno was at the centre of actuality is still actual: the principle of exchange, the fact that almost all of us have to exchange our labour power against the means of subsistence and thereby produce social wealth to which we do not have collective access, but to which only very few do. The antagonisms persist, in the form of the opposition between tremendous poverty and luxurious wealth, between social power and social powerlessness (see Adorno, 1964/2008, 111). This state of affairs threatens most people in their existence and spreads feelings of insecurity and fear. But the wage relation itself has fundamentally changed. Adorno spoke of integration, of the embourgeoisement of the workers. Their life habits have changed. In the centres of capitalism, after World War II, significant improvements in living standards were achieved through mass consumption, broad participation in education, through social-security systems and through relatively stable formal structures of political participation. Although Adorno repeatedly stressed that it was good that everyday life improved for the workers, he was at the same time sceptical and criticised the ideological character of these improvements. He saw them as serving the perpetuation of the irrationality of the whole. These irrationalities have increased and are producing new irrationalities of crisis. There is a huge increase of such phenomena. Around the world, in the name of freedom, more people than ever are today subjected, in a way that could not be predicted, to the blind laws of the labour market. The search for work has led to global migration, and the collapse of the world economy since

2008 has forced many to re-emigrate. Even the privileged wage workers in the centres have to increasingly fear for their livelihoods, as they find themselves, while in the midst of growing social wealth, in precarious employment situations, and they are giving up many of the achievements that were won in decades-long struggles, so that wages are falling, working hours are becoming longer again and ill-health is on the rise. For a long time now what's at stake has not been integration, embourgeoisement in the sense of an equalisation of living conditions, or consensus and compromise. Instead, everyone has been turned into market citizens, into individualised entrepreneurial subjects who compete with each other and must market themselves. If observers in the 1960s found that the liberal phase of capitalism had been superseded by a phase of capital concentration and of monopolies, then this has developed further: a few thousand globally operating enterprises are controlling, in the most detailed way, the wages and working times, product quality and prices of many hundreds of thousands of formally independent sub-contractors. The latter are forced to internalise the logic of competition, which in fact no longer exists, through the establishment of cost-and-profit centres, entrepreneurship, score cards and benchmarking. Highly standardised consumer options are offered on the market in far more fine-tuned targeting than was the case for the culture industry of the 1940s or 1950s. Life styles are created and reinforced in film, music, clothing and taste in wine. Social differences and pluralism are profitably marketed. As the numbers of the rich and well-to-do increase, so do the numbers of the poor and starving, even though it is the declared goal of the world community to reduce poverty. With structured financial products, speculation in grains has been made possible – and an interest-rate increase of only 1% costs the lives of many hundreds of thousands of people. Even though the growth orientation of the world economy is not sustainable, the well being of firms and countries is measured in terms of economic growth. The immense expansion of the capitalist world economy during the last decades has meant greater exploitation of resources such as metals or minerals. Conflicts over such resources are certain to occur, as was already the case with petroleum or will increasingly be the case with access to agricultural land, access to water and rare earth minerals. If the economy is to satisfy people's needs, then the exploitation of nature, which is allegedly carried out for the purpose of satisfying these needs, will lead to an accelerated disruption of the circular flows between people and nature and to a crisis of the social relations of nature. Human rights today are no longer violated by US-supported military dictatorships in Brazil, Argentina or Greece; instead, the US, together with the EU member states, has set up secret prisons and condone torture. While the number of formal democracies has risen, political participation in these democracies has been weakened and frequently complemented by right-wing populist and racist politics.

The perfect irrationality of contemporary social relations can be summed up in the claim that capitalist societies worldwide have become too rich for the capitalist mode of increasing wealth. About a billion people are threatened by hunger, while the assets of billionaires and millionaires continue to grow. It has

been estimated that worldwide assets of about 200 trillion US dollars exist alongside an annual economic output of about 50 trillion US dollars. This means that tendentially there will still be enormous conflicts around what capital may yet be valorised through the appropriation of living labour and what capital has to be destroyed. It is inevitable that with all this wealth that there will be crises, the destruction of wealth and further misery.

Adorno saw as a hallmark of his period that theory did not grip the masses and that practice was blocked. However, Adorno could not have guessed how much we have progressed today, also from a practical point of view. In many places trade-union realities are forming, and it was from such realities that Adorno in his time had high hopes for theory. In many regions of the globe people are opposing neoliberal capitalism. There are social movements and organisations that network regionally and worldwide, who know of each other and mutually support each other. In them we find, as a complement to the efforts on behalf of critical theory under the increasingly difficult conditions in the universities, manifold activities and initiatives around the production of critical knowledge, around the organisation of education and theory endeavouring to create the connection to emancipatory practice. Adorno was of the opinion that the only possibility left for emancipatory practice was theory. He had in mind a kind of aleatory materialism: speaking out for openness and diversity without fear, to keep saying it until at some point the relieving the liberating word might be uttered which could allow a process of fundamental emancipation and reconciliation to take place. For the sake of this liberating word we, too, should continue the project of critical theory today.

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