

# Critical Theory and Its Aftermath



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Within the field of philosophy and theory of education there exists a plurality of theoretical perspectives that attribute the term ‘critical’ to themselves in some way, shape or form. ‘Critical Theory’ in a narrower sense was adopted to refer to those writings associated with the Institute for Social Research – the ‘*Institut für Sozialforschung*’ (henceforth: IfS) – founded in Frankfurt in 1923 (cf. Jay 1973; Held 1980; Wiggershaus 1988; Demirovic 1999; Honneth et al. 2006). This tradition, also named the ‘Frankfurt School’, was labelled ‘Critical Theory’ over the course of the 1950s in the field of German-language sociology. Due to the different social movements around 1968, this school of thought came to be the object of increasing public attention. However, the thought of a ‘Frankfurt School’ as a somehow homogeneous strand of theory is misleading. Rather, it must be viewed as a cluster of different and often conflicting perspectives (cf. Dubiel 1992: 12f.; Rush 2004; Rieger-Ladich 2014: 66f.). For this reason, it cannot be the aim of this contribution to give a complete overview of these positions and writings.<sup>1</sup>

With its aim of being not only socio-critical but also self-reflexive, Critical Theory has developed different understandings of ‘critique’. Nonetheless, a few central themes can be identified. First of all, critique in this context can hardly be compared to scientific procedures in the tradition of critical rationalism. Critique here is not a scientific method that considers the falsification of scientific statements

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Translated by Teresa Behrends.

<sup>1</sup>In this chapter, we refer exclusively to the developments of theoretical approaches following the research of the IfS. For this we outline, in particular, the German-speaking reception.

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to be its main task. Instead, the term stands for the – both analytical and normative – objective of questioning forms of power and domination embedded in modern society. Understanding the effects and mechanisms of the latter is then part of a discussion that can itself be understood as an unorthodox self-reflection of Marxism (cf. Horkheimer 1937/2002: 213ff.). Thus experiences of suffering and injustice, as opposed to propositions to be falsified, constitute the onset of critique. It aims at historically constituted social structures and the specific mediation of social forces and individual dispositions. In order to question these elements of force within society, concepts such as exploitation, alienation, reification or disregard come into play. Critique thereby focuses on the analysis of social forms of domination whilst simultaneously searching for possibilities to change and overcome them.

In the following, we focus on selected aspects of Critical Theory that have opened up new ways of thinking for a philosophy of education that are not yet fully explored. The second part focuses on the educational discussion at different points in time, how it has profited from a new political climate influenced by Critical Theory and how the reception made use of certain motifs and works. Finally, we emphasise the possibilities of combining critical perspectives in the field of educational philosophy rather than putting the different positions against each other.

## Critical Theory of the ‘Frankfurt School’

The history of what would be known as Critical Theory in the field of social sciences and research is often divided into different phases. Max Horkheimer’s appointment as director of the Institute of Social Research (IfS) in 1931 is often portrayed as the starting point of the development of this research perspective. The IfS was founded in 1923 by Felix Weil in Frankfurt am Main and financed by a foundation, therefore, enabling it to work independently. Around the time of his appointment, Horkheimer also became professor of social philosophy at the Goethe University Frankfurt. Taking this as our point of departure, we will outline some of the problems treated by the IfS during its foundation phase (section “[From inception to exile](#)”). We will focus on some of the theoretical shifts that are linked to the members’ experiencing the rise of National Socialism and the Holocaust (section “[Radicalisations of critique](#)”). This unprecedented historical situation significantly impacted the development of the IfS during the post-war period and its effects continue to influence it to the present day. Subsequently, we shall outline the generational succession of the ‘Frankfurt School’ represented first and foremost by the theoretical advancements of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth (section “[The aftermath: reconstructions of critical theory](#)”).

## *From Inception to Exile*

A fundamental idea that oriented the group around Horkheimer follows a specific understanding of philosophy and social theory as ‘our time comprehended in thoughts’, which goes back to Hegel. This points to the goal of theoretically grasping society as a whole. Rather than analysing the social problems and crises of their times as isolated phenomena, the group around Horkheimer was, instead, trying to view them on a much broader scale, taking into account the general mediatedness of a multitude of particular social problems and society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> ‘Their time’ was formed by the economic crises and political struggles at the turn of the twentieth century, the devastating effects of the First World War, the failure of socialist ideas and their authoritarian manifestation in the Soviet Union as well as the collapse of the Weimar Republic (cf. Dubiel 1992: 12; Türcke and Bolte 1994: 10ff.). In these days, the disparity between the humanistic ideals implied by the Enlightenment, democracy and Reason, on the one hand, and social reality, on the other, became apparent. The analysis of these discrepancies was in principle led by the intention to continue with and renew Marxian economics (cf. Keckeisen 1983: 119).

This led to a second *leitmotiv*. As Marx states in the last thesis on Feuerbach: it isn’t enough to merely comprehend ‘our times’ in thoughts. Thus follows the demand for a significant change in social praxis as a main task of social theory. But in their perception of the society surrounding them, the social scientists at the IfS also noticed that those aspects (i.e. effects of class struggle or technological advances) considered to be agents of change in Marx’ prognosis did not in fact lead to the envisioned human emancipation from natural and social dependencies. Though society and its power structure were stricken with massive social inequalities, in addition to catastrophic events, the “powers of resistance that ought to have been mobilized were pulled in by the capitalist means of production” (Lehmann 2015: 20). Horkheimer once expressed this quite simply in 1932: “The world now has more raw materials, machines, and skilled workers, and better methods of production than ever before, but they are not profiting mankind as they ought. Society in its present form is unable to make effective use of the powers it has developed and the wealth it has amassed” (Horkheimer 1932/2002: 4).

In principle, there was a shared objective among early members of the ‘Frankfurt School’ to find explanations for the social calamities of the time in “the basic structure and the utmost aggravation of the pathologies of modern societies in order to draw conclusions for a practise of change” (Peukert 2015: 166). But to speak of a ‘founding date’ and Horkheimer as *spiritus rector* is misleading insofar as it tends to obscure the difficulties that, nonetheless, existed in developing a common ground for their diverse theoretical endeavours. Far from insinuating an identity of theoretical perspectives, we nevertheless would like to present two possible leads favouring

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<sup>2</sup>Because of the complexities of institutional and other relationships, we will not elaborate on the comings and goings of employees and associates of the IfS from different disciplines like psychology, sociology, (social) philosophy, economics and political science, art, literature and music studies.

the idea of a common theoretical basis, the various differences notwithstanding. First, one can speak of a certain *stance* or *mindset* common to all of these authors. This stance can be thought of as an underlying scepticism in the face of power structures that consider human beings, first and foremost, as disposable variables in the realm of economics and politics (cf. Horkheimer 1937/2002: 207; Winter and Zima 2007: 14). According to Leo Löwenthal, the connecting motif can be found in a certain negative and critical attitude prompting an “unrelenting analysis of the existing” (Löwenthal 1980: 80). Such a holistic horizon, however, makes such an analysis a complex and open-ended search for appropriate forms of theorisation.

This leads to a second trait or feature that these works can be said to share: the result of this search for reflexive modes of expressing this sceptical stance of refusal, as described above, is *the struggle to come up with a comprehensive theory of society and the individual*. The focus here lies on the struggle itself, since the traditional form of a materialistic theory of society had lost its driving force. Horkheimer and his colleagues were forced to look for changed theoretical positions as they grew more and more sceptical of Marxist concepts of social progress. Still the Marxian perspective was not dismissed altogether, but in fact radicalised in terms of a critical self-reflection of the materiality and historicity of all practical and theoretical discussions. Critical Theory, therefore, not only aims its critical trajectory at the historically conditioned forms of economic and political practice but also at the production of scientific knowledge itself. What is also at stake in this brand of critique is the position of the theorist herself as well as her intention to enable the formation of critical consciousness through an enlightened reflection of social grievances. This intention itself remains inseparable from the rationality and irrationality of an interest-based social practice. Theoretical concepts such as ‘reason’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘need’ are deeply interwoven in the socioeconomic structure of capitalist class relations (see Horkheimer 1937/2002).<sup>3</sup> In this respect, critical thinking is directed towards opposing dynamics. On one the hand, it does not abandon the historical perspective describing the social situation as a consequence of man’s struggle with himself and others as well as with the external natural circumstances as historically conditioned. On the other, this social situation is experienced as a “second nature” confronting the individual with its force and resistance (cf. Lehmann 2015: 21f.; Wiggerhaus 1988: 69).

In order to be able to work with this contradiction, the IfS sought to supplement its theoretical works with empirical social research. For Horkheimer this meant broadening the range of phenomena considered relevant to a theory of society: “namely, the question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychological development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture in the narrower sense (to which belong not only the so-called intellectual elements, such

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<sup>3</sup>Early on, Walter Benjamin, who was only loosely associated with the IfS throughout his lifetime, sometimes with tragic consequences, demanded a revision of the Marxian thesis of the historical conditioning of all interpretation – applying not only to the phenomena to be analysed but also to the position of the researcher himself. For any proposition claiming to be true remains “bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike” (Benjamin 2002: 463).

as science, art, and religion, but also law, customs, fashion, public opinion, sports, leisure activities, lifestyle, etc.)” (Horkheimer 1931/95: 12). This effort to include various parts of everyday life, socioeconomic aspects like social class as well as individual and collective cultural expressions required an interdisciplinary programme. As a result, Horkheimer considered the cooperation between different disciplines of theoretical and empirical sciences to be an indispensable strategy for the IfS.

The reception of psychoanalytic concepts was able to bridge these different disciplinary perspectives. It was Erich Fromm (1932: 23) who used a Freudo-Marxist social psychology to explain influences of economic conditions on personal dispositions. His focus on the social conditions of the psyche results in a ‘characterology’ that claims to offer explanations as to why a majority of the population acts counter to their own objective interests (cf. Fromm 1932: 56). The analytic potential of this approach appears in the empirical works on the problem of *conformism, authority* and *prejudice*. Fromm (1980) was in charge of the first empirical study at the IfS in the late 1920s, which set out to find answers to the question why these social psychological phenomena were particularly prevalent among workers and employees – the segment of the population that would have been expected to be more immune to the fascist ideas that were on the rise at the time of this study. Because of the disillusioning findings that resulted in the concept of the ‘authoritarian personality’, the reactionary attitudes in the majority of the population became overt. A second collection of studies was thematically similar and is known mostly for Fromm’s contributions concerning the implementation of the authoritarian personality within the workings of the modern family (cf. IfS 1936).<sup>4</sup> Special emphasis was placed here on the thesis that in order to understand processes of submission in familial contexts, which Fromm already conceptualises as socially mediated, these are not to be understood merely in terms of repression. Instead, submission is linked to libidinal investments through ideology. Conformist behaviour is promoted by the promise of power yields and the possibility of compensating the erosion of traditional orientations in modern societies by means of (re)assurance through alternative authoritarian mechanisms. Another internationally known study grew out of the research project *Studies in Prejudice* conducted – in cooperation with researchers from the University of California at Berkeley – by those members of the IfS who had immigrated to the United States in the 1940s. The results from previous studies were developed further by Theodor W. Adorno. *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) was an inquiry into the degree of susceptibility among Americans for antidemocratic propaganda, predispositions for ethnocentric prejudice and other authoritarian tendencies. As in earlier studies, the research was “guided by the following major hypothesis: that the political, economic, and social convictions of an

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<sup>4</sup>From the very beginning, Herbert Marcuse had been contributing to the work on the programmatic integration of psychoanalysis into a critical theory of society. His contributions to the studies of the IfS initially focused on the history of ideas. It was not until 1955 that he tried to combine this integration of psychoanalysis and critical theory with a utopian idea of the “liberated eros” (cf. Marcuse 1955).

individual often form a broad and coherent pattern, as if bound together by a ‘mentality’ or ‘spirit’, and that this pattern is an expression of deep-lying trends in his personality” (Adorno et al. 1950: 1). Although its methodological design and the generalisability of the results have frequently been called into question, it can be stated that the basic propositions, especially of this study, are of increasing relevance again today in the face of new populist movements and authoritarian regimes across the globe. The study also was an important source for discussions concerning the problem of authority and the difficulties with the collective memory of the National Socialist regime in post-war Germany, especially around 1968 (see section “[Critique of education: critical theory as philosophy of education](#)”).

### *Radicalisations of Critique*

According to Horkheimer, Critical Theory and its inquiries are led by the shared normative aim to find a way for society to implement “reasonable conditions of life” (Horkheimer 1937/2002: 199). The accounts of the atrocities committed during the NS-regime, antisemitism and violence against everything that the fascist regime perceived as deviant, and above all the widespread approval thereof among the German population at the time, caused the protagonists of the Frankfurt School to radicalise their theoretical position. In the end, it was civilisation itself that was at stake for Horkheimer and others. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Horkheimer and Adorno had been working on during the mid-1940s, may be the most prominent example of this intensification of negativity in their theoretical approach. The book relentlessly deconstructs the claims of the Enlightenment in an attempt to come to terms with the fact that the Enlightenment was unable to prevent the barbarity of the Nazi regime. It traces the genealogy of the instrumental use of concepts such as reason, liberty or truth, in which the ‘wholly false totality’ of society appears as both knowledge and practice. The authors’ objective here is to decipher this identitarian and instrumental calculus that has been predominant in Western societies since the disenchantment of mythical world views through progress and knowledge. Moreover, they analyse how this sort of calculus inscribes itself in spheres of politics, markets and culture but also in seemingly unconstrained everyday interaction (cf. Horkheimer/Adorno 1947/2002). As to the functioning of this enlightenment rationality, which had fueled the organized mass destruction of human beings in the first half of the twentieth century, Adorno writes: “There is nothing innocuous left”. (Adorno 1951/2005: 25). No such concept – whether it be reason, utility or humanity – can be assumed to contain a nucleus impartial to socioeconomic and historical conditions, which could somehow ensure the meaning and ‘innocent’ use of the concept. Each concept attains its relevance only in the ever-changing conditions of its particular usage and is, therefore, rendered problematic at its core. This also means that critical reflection, in terms of a goal and in terms of an intellectual practice, may not be dismissed, although it cannot hope to come to a final conclusion. It also implies that the search for change cannot make use of either the enlightenment

concepts themselves or whichever promising alternative. All that is left, according to Horkheimer and Adorno (2002: XVIff.), is a relentless form of critical self-reflection that cannot come to a halt in any given form or concept.

In this argument, the critical theorist needs to focus on what is both the problematic nature and the possibility of critique itself: on the delimiting dynamics of a use of instrumental reason submitting any object qua identification to domination. Critique in the sense of Horkheimer and Adorno is always all-encompassing insofar as it points to the reification of all natural, individual or collective expressions in the name of comparability and identity, fungibility and exchange value. For them “public life has reached a state in which thought is being turned inescapably into a commodity and language into celebration of the commodity” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: XIV). Moreover, both diversity and difference are used, disciplined and destroyed according to the “friend or foe” formula (cf. *ibid.*: 137ff.; Adorno 1951/2005: 131f.). This, in a dialectic turn, contradicts the concept of reason itself. As it turns out it is reason itself, as a praxis, that is responsible for the irrational developments contradicting the rational goal of emancipation “which aims at [...] an alteration of society as a whole” (Horkheimer 1937/2002: 208). For the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (as well as for Herbert Marcuse 1964/2002), it seems impossible to separate the focus on epistemological views from the analysis of historically conditioned social structure, technology or *Lebenspraxis*.

Adorno’s further writings all adhere to this critical perspective and can be considered paradigmatic for the first generation of Critical Theory, radicalising the concept of negativity. His renunciation of affirmation, of any notion of reconciliation, nevertheless, tries to preserve a transformative view. This is achieved paradoxically by conceding to the historical and social conditionedness of thought, to the fact that thinking is always necessarily entwined in power relations. In terms of this radically negative dialectic, Adorno emphasises that criticism can only be of the immanent type. It is impossible for the individual to take a position outside of the social conditions surrounding him precisely because these social conditions are the determining force of him becoming a subject in the first place. The modern experience of reification and alienation<sup>5</sup> is inscribed in the individuals to the point that “the possibility of breaking out of it without unbearable internal conflict, even just in one’s mind, is ever shrinking” (Adorno 1965/95: 18). Adorno calls this a “triumph of integration” and ideology. Accordingly, the critical stance itself is, even in its innermost being, identifiable with the object of its criticism that it is trying to break away from theoretically and practically.

This radicalness is a recurring theme also in Adorno’s later works, in his antisystematic effort to systematize his philosophical positions in the *Negative Dialektik* (1966a/97) and the *Minima Moralia* (1951/2005), as well as the unfinished *Ästhetische Theorie* (1973/2000). It is also what shaped his role in the public dispute about positivism in German sociology (*‘Positivismusstreit’*). Together with Jürgen Habermas (who became a member of the IfS in 1956) Adorno criticised the perspective and methodology of Karl Popper and others (cf. Adorno et al. 1969/93) accusing

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<sup>5</sup>For current contributions to this debate, see Jaeggi 2005; Honneth 2015.

them of ‘fetishizing’ a formal-logical concept of science without taking into account the limits of formal logics or the social relations of productions that science is embedded in (cf. Adorno 1969/95: 280ff.). On the one hand, Adorno agrees with Popper and his criticism of an all too easy transfer of methods from the natural to social sciences and the basic relevance of working in a problem-oriented fashion versus misled beliefs in objectivity and normative neutrality (cf. Adorno 1962/95: 550f.). Contrary to Popper, on the other hand, it is central to Adorno’s position that the social sciences work with a concept of society at large and its reproduction through antagonistic processes on different micro-, meso- and macro levels.

### *The Aftermath: Reconstructions of Critical Theory*

As we have seen, for those belonging to first generation Critical Theory was centred around the assumption that all thought and action is embedded in its social conditions and their normativity in an all-encompassing fashion. It is precisely here that a point of contention emerges for the generation coming after Horkheimer and Adorno, whose protagonists will choose alternative theoretical paths. Here, too, we will have to limit our remarks to sketches portraying the two internationally known theorists that have shaped the project of Critical Theory since the mid-1960s: Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth.<sup>6</sup>

The diversity of their research had a big impact internationally and across (sub) disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Both their inaugural lectures (Habermas 1968: 301ff.; Honneth 1994) refer to and, by the same token, adapt the programme that Horkheimer had announced in the 1930s: an “interdisciplinary endeavor of a critical diagnosis of social reality” (Honneth 1994: 88). But both also turn away from the postulate of radical negativity that was eminent in the theoretical framework of their predecessors, who had seen society riven by fundamental antagonisms, humanity dominated by an omnipresent principle of exchange, reason paradoxically turned into unreason and who were critical of ideology as a societal “total context of deception/delusion” (*‘universaler Verblendungszusammenhang’*) (Adorno 1973/2000: 252).<sup>7</sup> Both pursue the issue of how the “trace of immanent transcendence in everyday culture” (Honneth 1994: 90) can be conceptualised, which in turn can motivate critical research. They both stand for the reconstruction of Critical Theory and for a specific turn in its programme trying to avoid the first generation aporias (cf. Peukert 1993). Profiting from the influence of other

<sup>6</sup>Habermas succeeded Horkheimer in 1964 and was appointed chair of philosophy and sociology at the Goethe University Frankfurt. Honneth has been a professor for social philosophy in Frankfurt since 1996 and has served as director of the IfS since 2001.

<sup>7</sup>This concept reflects the fact that societal integration is imposed primarily by economic principles – a fact which is, throughout society, ideologically obscured, so that the experience of the corresponding contradictions, for example, between processes of alienation and the postulate of self-realisation, cannot be adequately expressed (cf. Adorno 1966a/97: 364).



international theorists, the leading paradigms in Critical Theory become the theory of communicative action for Habermas (a) and a concept of intersubjective recognition for Honneth (b).

(a) For Habermas, a social-scientific critique aiming at possibilities for emancipation is rendered impossible by the verdict of a historical and societal totality. In order to free himself from the theoretical necessity to conceptualise a pervasive subjection of inner and outer human nature to such a totality, he makes two important theoretical decisions. First, he disbands the prominent position of the Enlightenment concept of reason and its continuation in the philosophy of consciousness in German idealism. This allows him to analytically decouple the moral and cognitive development of the individual, on the one hand, and the internalisation of historical and societal forms of rationality, on the other. He then abstracts the levels of societal development from particular forms of everyday practice (cf. Habermas 1987: 382f.). Habermas is trying to separate the excessiveness of the structures of domination from the historically conditioned processes of communication and learning. The shift in his theoretical approach moves the focus from the subject to intersubjectivity, on the one hand, and from the modern concept of reason to communicative action, on the other. It is the structure of language itself that makes the difference (cf. Habermas 1971: 314): a language-based interaction does not simply follow the logic of reification, exchange and utility but needs to refer to the autonomy and responsibility of the individual. This “expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus” (ibid.). Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action* therefore “describes structures of action and structures of mutual understanding that are found in the intuitive knowledge of competent members of modern societies” (Habermas 1987: 383). These structures are seen as founded in human nature, on an anthropological level, as well as in the sedimentations of intersubjective communication processes.

A second pillar of Habermas’ theory is the differentiation of the concept of practice itself. In Marxian thought, this is located in the economic sphere of relations of production. In Habermas’ view, this reduces action to instrumental forms. His theoretical shift in the paradigm of production and interaction is supposed to overcome this perspective of an integration of all societal action in an all-encompassing system. By taking into account the differences between forms of action in this manner, it becomes possible to describe the conditions of social progress (cf. Iser 2008: 163; Honneth 1994: 94). This concerns another differentiation Habermas makes: his understanding of the concept of ‘work’ as an instrumentally rational action bound by technical rules and strategic analytical knowledge is opposed by his concept of communicative action. Communicative action is “symbolically mediated interaction” (Habermas 1968: 62) that can develop its own rational dynamic rather than being completely determined by social structures. It requires the intersubjective negotiation of shared values and mutual recognition (cf. ibid.: 62ff.). Ultimately, there is “a potential located within the individual and the human species – a potential for communicative reason constructed for intersubjectively mediated self-reflection, that stands opposite to the power and force of functional systems and which expresses itself historically not only in postconventional ethics but also in

modern legal systems and constitutions” (Peukert 2015: 185; cf. Peukert 1993: 164f.). The pathologies of modern societies stem from the powerful mechanisms of integration of economic, political, administrative systems or systems of mass culture that colonise different social arenas with their own instrumental rational action. Habermas’ thesis of colonisation thereby stresses the precarity of everyday communicative interaction and its validity (Habermas 1987: 113ff.374ff.).

(b) Axel Honneth’s adaptation of the Hegelian “struggle for recognition” (Honneth 1992: 7) presents another shift in Critical Theory. Honneth starts out by pointing out a deficit he sees in Habermas’ effort to fundamentally relate sociocritical analysis to normative principles of communication. For Honneth, criticism becomes relevant only in response to the “experience of infringement of intuitive concepts of justice” (Honneth 1994: 99). It is a ‘moral sensitivity’ that constitutes the starting point for theoretical and social-scientific criticism of social grievances. This type of moral sensitivity precedes communicative action rather than being triggered by the deformations of symbolic interaction. The painful experience of a “violation of identity claims acquired through processes of socialisation” (ibid. 98) is the primary precondition for connecting negativity and practical resistance (cf. Iser 2008: 162ff.). In the framework of Honneth’s concept of intersubjective relationships of recognition, subjective experience is situated in the context of the social organisation and distribution of appreciation. Critical analysis thus pertains to the damage to human identity formation that is done in the context of pathological developments of society and reason. This damage can be articulated in terms of injustice, discrimination or disadvantage and provokes reactions of outrage and shame on a corporeal level. In order to answer the always problematic question as to what can count as legitimate and reasonable in differing social contexts, Honneth distinguishes between three forms of intersubjective recognition. “The communicative preconditions of successful identity formation are: emotional attention and care in intimate relationships such as love or friendship, the legal recognition as a morally competent member of society and finally the social recognition of individual achievements and abilities” (Honneth 1994: 104). Honneth refers to the historical achievements in the extension of relationships of recognition – in the fields of family and friendship, politics and law, workplace and market relations. By the same token he refers to the dynamic contexts in which criticism of normative injuries is triggered, for example, in terms of disrespect for individual achievements or the discrediting of processes of self-realisation and solidarity (cf. Fraser and Honneth 2003; Honneth 2007).

In light of these negative images of social relations, the claims of the Enlightenment are still relevant, as Honneth points out: “To name the legacy of Critical Theory would entail to pinpoint the explosive charge contained in the thought of a social pathology of reason still pertinent for present-day theory; as opposed to the tendency to reduce social criticism to a normative, situational or local utterance of opinion, one would have to make clear its interrelation with historically conditioned reason” (Honneth 2007: 30).<sup>8</sup> This critical endeavour has

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<sup>8</sup>It is still a matter of debate whether Honneth’s work itself can live up to these standards. For an overview of the development of Honneth’s theory of recognition, see: cf. Iser 2008: 162ff. For a critical examination, see Fraser and Honneth 2003; Bedorf 2010.

neither been abandoned nor completely fulfilled, as indicated by the numerous international debates in fields like social philosophy and sociology, philosophy of language and discourse, aesthetics, ethics, legal studies (cf. Benhabib 1986; Honneth et al. 1989; Demirovic 2003; Rush 2004; Winter and Zima 2007; Forst et al. 2009) – as well as philosophy of education.

## **Critical Theory and Educational Thinking: Passages and Lines of Reception**

One can pose the question concerning the relationship between Critical Theory and educational reflection on different levels. First it needs to be noted that the authors of the ‘Frankfurt School’, especially those of the first generation, have themselves commented on issues pertaining to education and philosophy of education. A common theme here is the emphasis on the necessity to connect basic conceptual debates with sociocritical reflection. Therefore, most of their thoughts on the subject were overtly critical of the actual forms of educational studies predominant in Germany until the 1960s (see Adorno 1971: 133ff.). During this period of widespread search for alternative concepts of educational practice, new theoretical perspectives appeared on the scene (section “[Translations: from critique to educational programmes](#)”) that eventually became referred to as ‘critical educational studies’ (*Kritische Erziehungswissenschaft*). These approaches draw more upon Habermas’ theory than the theories and ideas developed by the first generation. As a response to this, further developments, in turn, called for a deeper reflection and wider reception of Adorno’s work in the field of philosophy of education. Another strand in the reception of Critical Theory constitutes a more philosophical debate concerning the concept of *Bildung* that draws on the work of Adorno (section “[Negativity and experience – connections to a philosophy of Bildung](#)”).

### ***Critique of Education: Critical Theory as Philosophy of Education***

Critical Theory refers to questions of education because it does not analyse social formations along the lines of ‘objective’ structural conditions. This is precisely the deficiency it sees in Marxist thinking, insofar as Marxism underestimates and does not sufficiently reflect the subjective dimensions of capitalist societal integration – i.e. the processes working on a psychological level and their repercussions on social demeanour. On a theoretical and methodological level, this opens up a space for concepts of psychoanalysis to step in, whereas on another, more thematic level, this causes Critical Theory to make education an object of attention.

The first work published by the group of authors at the IfS, ‘Studies about Authority and Family’ (*Studien über Autorität und Familie* 1936), is a theoretical and empirical enquiry into historically specific forms of mediation of society and the individual. Erich Fromm describes the family as the “psychological agent of society” (Fromm 1932/1999, S. 42) and, thereby, dismisses Freud’s view that the family and its inner dynamics is itself the root cause of individual personality formation. Educational practices are initially viewed as places where the reproduction of certain functions of society takes place. At the same time, these processes are not seen as simple, tension-free assimilation. Family, as a social institution, is much rather a room where contradictory elements are mediated. In this way, the authors of the study can show how the overall societal change towards a growing authoritarianism that was taking place at the time (see section “[From inception to exile](#)”) was generated by the interplay of individual, educational, social and family factors. So, already at this point in the history of Critical Theory, the possibility arises to frame the question of progressive and emancipatory change as a question of educational concepts.<sup>9</sup>

As Adorno’s later works and especially his radio essays show, the mediation of individual and society in relation to an authoritarian horizon is one – if not the most eminent (cf. Friesenhahn 1985) – educational problem for Critical Theory. The radio lectures – published posthumously (see Adorno 1971) – are perhaps Adorno’s best-known work in the German-speaking field of education. Although he explicitly takes a stand concerning questions of contemporary education, this is not to be misread as moral self-assurance or practical orientation for those working in the field of education.<sup>10</sup> The common theme of these essays can be identified in Adorno’s effort to promote a debate about urgent problems that are not sufficiently considered by educational studies in his view. The famous and often cited sentence “the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again” (Adorno 1966b/2005: 191) poses the question of accountability that Adorno himself could not answer in a non-conflictual way. Here, ‘Auschwitz’ does not just stand for barbarity as opposed to civilisation but, just as in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for a dialectic turn, i.e. for the worst excesses of rationalisation resulting in the rationally planned and calculated mass murder of European Jews and other persecuted groups. “If barbarism itself is inscribed within the principle of civilization, then there is something desperate in the attempt to rise up against it” (ibid.). Adorno says this in order to emphasise that one has to be conscious of this desperate element so as not to fall prey to a mere “idealistic platitudes” (ibid.). His aim is to invoke sensitivity for a problem that is

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<sup>9</sup>Especially Fromm was interested in educational concepts, and from the 1950s onward he became involved in educational projects, for example, in Cuernavaca, Mexiko: “He propagated A. S. Neills ‘Summerhill’, cooperated with Ivan Illich and Paolo Freire in Illich’s ‘Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC)’ and reflected on the pedagogy of Father Wasson, who managed an orphanage in his neighbourhood in Cuernavaca” (Funk 1983: 114; cf. Claßen 1991).

<sup>10</sup>Although this has not kept readers from ‘finding’ both in the texts (see section “[Translations: from critique to educational programmes](#)”).

just as urgent as it seems to be unsolvable. But it is precisely this sort of sensitisation for the entwinement of psychological dynamics and the greater social context that becomes an educational problem. The only remedy against the reproduction of the “authoritarian” and “manipulative character” (ibid.: 199) would be ‘autonomy’ – understood as “power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating” (ibid.: 196), though there is no way of pointing out the specific educational means to achieve this. Adorno often expresses such reservations against educational solutions for social problems (e.g.: 195), but without implying that he does not still see these problems as educational.

Adorno and Horkheimer also adapted this idea of a dialectic turn from progressive developments into new forms of domination and oppression in relation to the concept of *Bildung*. In a speech given in 1952, on the occasion of a matriculation ceremony, Horkheimer stated that education was undergoing a crisis resulting from the process of civilisation itself (cf. Horkheimer 1985: 411). *Bildung* represents, for Horkheimer, a specific relationship between inner and outer nature rather than mere individual development as in idealistic concepts. The formation implied in *Bildung* has – through the historical developments of industrialisation and modernity – turned into a kind of treatment or processing, so that nature (including human nature) now appears as nothing more than the raw material to be handled in an instrumental fashion. Put differently, in these historical circumstances, education refers to the domination of nature and self. Confronted with this diagnosis, Horkheimer then sketches out an alternate concept of *Bildung* that consists in a certain form of dedication (‘Hingabe’) to objects closely tied to the reflection of their social contexts and collective debates around them. In doing so, Horkheimer emphasises the proximity between *Bildung* and political involvement (cf. ibid.: 416 ff.).

In comparison, one of Adorno’s well-known texts on the topic – ‘Theory of decayed *Bildung*’ (*Theorie der Halbbildung*, 1959a/97) – appears to take up where Horkheimer’s speech left off: addressing the same issues as well as the problems insinuated therein. Adorno understands *Bildung* in terms of the subject’s relation to culture (ibid.: 94). At the same time, he stresses the ambivalence in the concept of culture referring to certain antagonisms within society: in cultivation, the productive work or processing of natural resources, on the one hand, and culture in the arts and humanities as well as the noninstrumental production of cultural assets, on the other. The philosophical idea of *Bildung* once represented the emancipatory potential embedded in this antagonism in the sense of human enlightenment. In contrast, the social reality of *Bildung* is torn between assimilation and a calculus of fungibility, on one side, and social distinction and hierarchisation, on the other. Yet another difficulty lies in the fact that even the perception and reflection of these antagonisms are obscured for individual experience. What remains is ‘anachronism’ – i.e. the confrontation of the actual social reality with what the concept of *Bildung* is supposed to mean – in order to be able to refer to the critical nucleus in the concept of *Bildung* (cf. ibid.:121).

## *Translations: From Critique to Educational Programmes*

The German<sup>11</sup> reception of Critical Theory began during the formative years after the Second World War when the ‘Frankfurt School’ had considerable impact on the political and cultural climate of the new German republic (cf. Demirovic 1999). Within the German public consciousness, the suppression of both guilt and memories of National Socialism represented the prevailing attitude for much of the post-war period. Until the 1960s the working through the Past<sup>12</sup> was not seen as a political, biographical and educational task. But for the so-called *68 generation* the confrontation with their parents’ past deeds also leads to a general questioning of the bourgeois family and contemporary educational practices. In the search for suitable references in social theory, they (re)discovered the publications of the IfS, especially Adorno’s works, but also writings by Fromm, Horkheimer and Marcuse. Psychoanalysis, in connection with Marxist social criticism, similar to the earlier perspectives of Wilhelm Reich and Siegfried Bernfeld, gave rise to new points of view on educational relations and practices (cf. Baader and Hermann 2011). ‘Antiauthoritarian Education’ became the label for the new concepts of education that made an effort to better meet the ‘natural needs’ of children in the hopes that they would become confident individuals, also politically speaking, and that the intergenerational (re)production of the ‘authoritarian personality’ could be stopped (cf. Claßen 1973 and also, referring to international sources: Schroedter 2007).

Alongside these more practical considerations in the communes and in the *Kinderladen-movement*, educational studies were beginning to take note of Critical Theory around the same time.<sup>13</sup> The predominant strand of theory in German-speaking academic discourse during the first half of the twentieth century was the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*. By the 1960s, more and more doubts were voiced concerning the ontological determination of pedagogy and the isolated focus on an idealised ‘reality’ of education. Whilst some were trying to overcome this by promoting a ‘realistic turn’ to more empirical research, authors like Herwig Blankertz, Klaus Mollenhauer and Wolfgang Klafki, among others, made an effort to use the theoretical means provided by Critical Theory to enable a critical self-reflection of the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* (cf. Heyting and Winch 2004,

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<sup>11</sup> In the following section, we will focus on the German-speaking field of social sciences since the Frankfurt School was considerably influential here, though its impact went further than that. The writings and ideas of Critical Theory have been widely received in many different international contexts, as well, which cannot be discussed here in detail. For further reading, see, for example, the contributions in Kohli 1996, Sünker and Krüger 1999 and Gur-Ze’ev 2005 as well as further references in Peukert 2015; for an overview of the Brazilian sources, see Pucci and de Oliveira Silva (2015).

<sup>12</sup> See Adornos lecture of 1959b (2005): *The Meaning of Working through the Past (Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit)*.

<sup>13</sup> Moreover, different perspectives aiming at a sociocritical reflection of education and/or *Bildung* also referred to Marx and Hegel. Especially, the critical philosophy of education of Heinz-Joachim Heydorn (1970/2004; cf. Bünger et al. 2009) can be read in light of parallels and differences to the educational reception of Critical Theory.

314ff.).<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas served as the central point of reference for this endeavour, especially since he promoted a critical, emancipatory interest for the sciences in his inaugural lecture in 1965 (Habermas 1968: 301ff.) and an even more in-depth treatment in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Habermas 1971). The above-mentioned authors adopted this emancipatory stance (see Klafki 1971: 262ff.; 1992). Contrary to the sciences with a more practical or a more technical orientation, they established the profile and scientific self-conception of a ‘critical science of education’ (*Kritische Erziehungswissenschaft*) through an emancipatory turn of traditional concepts and methods.

From the late 1960s onward, this perspective grew increasingly influential,<sup>15</sup> due in part also to political tendencies of the time towards a reform of certain parts of the educational system. On a theoretic level the concept of emancipation refers to the problem of its specification (cf. Keckeisen 1983, S. 128 ff.). Again, Habermas became an important point of reference in this debate. His understanding of human interaction as a basic anthropological form independent of instrumental forms of action like ‘work’ enabled the educational discourse to conceptualise communicative action as a principle that could be seen as a remedy against the excesses of instrumental reason (cf. Peukert 2015: 183). According to this view, education itself was understood as communicative action (cf. Mollenhauer 1972) but also as an effort to create the competence necessary for the individual to communicate and develop informed relations to one’s self, the world and others. But this leads to the classic paradox of education: in order to create something, educational programmes need to presuppose precisely what they are trying to create, and in this case that would be communicative action and the individual ability to engage in it.<sup>16</sup> Generally speaking, it should be noted that in terms of this particular strand of educational studies “the reception of Critical Theory did not so much adopt the radical critique of reason of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but rather certain key concepts like ‘emancipation’, ‘autonomy’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘criticism’” in order to apply them to a “much needed modernization of political culture” (Peukert 2015: 192). Accordingly, one can speak of a selective reception – if not a ‘non-reception’ – in this context (cf. Baader and Hermann 2011; Schäfer 2004). The disillusionment with the results as well as the political changes over the course of the reform of the school system, just as with this theory-immanent background, gave rise to numerous new variations on critical pedagogics and educational studies (see Paffrath 1987; Sünker and Krüger 1999).

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<sup>14</sup> Important sources are: Dahmer and Klafki (1968); Mollenhauer (1968); Blankertz (1963/1985).

<sup>15</sup> In particular, the expansion of the secondary and tertiary education sector, which was developed up to the mid-1970s, and the expansion of comprehensive schools, through which the Federal Republic of Germany sought to connect with international structures in the education system (see Peukert 2015: 187).

<sup>16</sup> In his critique of the educational reception of Habermas, Jan Masschelein (1991: 196ff.) has pointed out that such problems are related to a traditional philosophical understanding of action centred around the subject, which obscures the ethical implications of the Habermasian concept of intersubjectivity.

Contemporary perspectives linked to Critical Theory are trying to overcome the problems and deficiencies of the *Kritische Erziehungswissenschaft* described above. Instead of using only select concepts, Andreas Gruschka aims at explicitly describing a ‘negative pedagogy’ (Gruschka 1988). Drawing on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*, his objective is to incorporate the impetus of critical self-reflection that has not yet been fully explored for educational theory. For Gruschka, the fact that education’s encounter with Critical Theory had comparatively little impact is symptomatic for educational thinking in itself: the claim of directly linking theory and practice is traditionally embedded in educational thinking. This causes educational theory to shy away from thorough analysis of problems and inquiry into possible reasons for the failure of specific programmes. Instead, it all too easily soothes itself with postulates of seemingly ‘right’ forms of practice. By focusing on the conceptualisation of the ‘right thing to do’, pedagogy forgets to ask whether such concepts can in fact be redeemed. It can learn from Critical Theory how the socially conditioned irreconcilability of theory and practice can become productive when seen as a frame for critical self-reflection. The goal here is to scientifically reconstruct – and also find empirical explanations for – the interrelation and mediation of requirements and reality in order to understand “why pedagogy isn’t what it claims to be” (Gruschka 2015: 44). To understand the contradictory praxis that gives rise to the difference between what is and what ought to be, qualitative research uses the methodology of ‘objective hermeneutics’, which was developed by Ulrich Oevermann (1983) and draws on Adorno’s works. Besides providing insight into problematic educational cases, the task of critique here is to find options for practical improvements (see Gruschka 2015: 48 ff.).

Further theoretical developments connected to Critical Theory shed light on topics like heterogeneity and inequality, inclusion and difference. Annedore Prengel (1999) sees an important source for her ‘pedagogy of diversity’ not only in Honneth’s writings on the concept of recognition but already in Adorno’s thoughts on the motif of the ‘nonidentical’. This shows that Critical Theory’s objection to the formation of bourgeois-capitalist society is not confined to issues of the labour movement that more traditional Marxist theory used to be focused on. Its theoretical concepts are rather open to a wider scope of issues ranging from feminist to anti-racist or other political perspectives concerned with anti-discrimination and diversity. Moreover, since Honneth’s theory of recognition contains the theme of the basic human need for reciprocal recognition, it has been adapted both for educational concepts and in philosophy of education (see, for example, Hafeneger et al. 2013; Schäfer and Thompson 2010). It is important to point out that in the discussion surrounding the ‘recognition of the other’ the concept of recognition does not – as in the concept of tolerance – simply point to the mutual respect for one another’s specific individual or group identity. Instead, it interrupts and transcends such a logic of ascription and identification of group membership and identity categories. Recognition, understood in this way, is an ambivalent phenomenon infused with power and a form of constituting relations to one’s self and others. In this interpretation of the concept of recognition – and in light of *theories of subjectivation* – the discussion goes well beyond the ideas promoted by Honneth (cf. Balzer and Ricken 2010).



## *Negativity and Experience – Connections to a Philosophy of Bildung*

The strand of theory concerned with a philosophy of education is, even more than Gruschka's 'Negative Pedagogy', very cautious when it comes to programmatic designs. It is primarily concerned with the question of *Bildung's* scope as an expression of human self-realisation in the face of an indetermined relationship with one's self and the world. According to this view, not only Critical Theory's earlier works appear as a radical questioning of *Bildung*. Especially the form of critique prominent in Adorno's thought can be interpreted in light of a theory of *Bildung*. The above-mentioned text *Theorie der Halbbildung* bids farewell to the idealistic concept that categorically places *Bildung* outside of social forms of power. Here, the mere possibility and preconditions of *Bildung* are tied to processes of socialisation in which, for example, the 'culture industry' plays a substantial role in shaping the individual's experiences, one's ways of thinking and perceiving. Nevertheless, this reasoning is not just stating a completely closed 'context of deception' (*Verblendungszusammenhang*) eliminating even the slightest potential for *Bildung*. The paradoxical position of critique cannot be itself determined by the person inhabiting that position in the face of "objective deception" (Gamm 1985; cf. Adorno 1951/2005: 50). Therefore, critique, in an epistemological sense, and criticism of society are two inseparable analytical pathways. All thought – including critical thought – finds itself entwined in the social logics of disposing of and identifying 'things'. According to Adorno, this type of thinking necessarily cuts off everything that remains incommensurable with these logics. But the fact that this rational grasp can never completely take hold of the self, the other and the world opens a space of self-critical potential in which the identification can be turned against itself in order to "transcend the concept through the concept" (Adorno 1966a/1997: 27). Transposed to the realm of *Bildung* in terms of the interrelationship of the I and the world, this means that this interrelationship would be called to question its own formation, its own social conditionedness.

Current reflections referring to the concept of educational experience (*bildende Erfahrung*) also follow the path just sketched out and critically adapt the traditional concept of experience connecting it to some of Adorno's thoughts (see Pongratz 1986; Schäfer 2004; Thompson 2006, 2009). Central to Humboldt's neo-humanist concept of *Bildung* is the basic interrelationship of 'self-action' and 'receptiveness' (*Selbsttätigkeit* und *Empfänglichkeit*). If this is not to be conceptualised as a pre-social resource centred in the individual and its 'pure' and unobscured access to the world, then the eminent question is how to conceive of the experiences of experience obscured by sociocultural dispositives (cf. Kappner 1984: 20).<sup>17</sup> *Bildung* in this sense means the experience of the conditionality of experience, and enables at best

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<sup>17</sup>Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1973) tackles the related question, whether modern art can be the place where the issue of impeded experience can or ought to be broached so that experience becomes accessible by way of its inaccessibility.

self- and sociocritical reflexive processes. Other themes that have inspired recent advances in the theory of *Bildung* are the manifold aspects of the concept of the nonidentical as well as the meaning of sensuality and corporeality. As a dialectic of identitarian perception and inevitable deception, the ideas of ‘mindfulness’ (*Eingedenken*) in light of the nonidentical and the “somatic dimension” (Adorno 1966a/1997: 203) call for new discussions about the presumed self-assurance of the subject of *Bildung* and its non-affirmative access to the world in the educational process (cf. Meyer-Drawe 1990; Koller 1999; Huhtala 2016).

## Critical Theory of Education Across Theoretical and Practical Borders

As much as Critical Theory is itself subjected to modern claims of self-understanding – due to its own problematisation of the contradictory consequences of the Enlightenment – it cannot easily be subsumed under categories like ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’, which are often seen as dichotomous worlds of thoughts (cf. Wellmer 1993). It also seems plausible to view the relation between various critical theories – such as (post)structuralist, materialistic or cultural studies – not as mutually exclusive but rather in terms of discursive axes. The shared refusal to be confined to one theoretical place or approach to research, for instance the self-reflexive analysis of the manifold contexts of power and domination, currently open spaces for further discussions relevant to educational issues (Snir 2017; Gur-Ze’ev 2005; Dammer et al. 2015).

The above-mentioned philosophical ideas already point towards a type of thinking that recognises the fact that educational theory cannot rely on domestic concepts and traditions alone to describe educational thought and practice. Following these ideas, a philosophy of education would entail working on an open, transdisciplinary and critically informed (re)search. This openness and ‘estrangement’ of familiar educational programmes and conceptualisations can also be understood as a certain ‘boundary work’ seeking to question concepts such as emancipation, reason, subject etc. in terms of their limitations and delimitations in the context of societal formations. To illustrate this, the spectrum of critical reflections that can be linked to the critical theory includes (a) various forms of criticism of capitalism, its contradictions, (re-)production of injustice and inequality; (b) the problem of authority and authoritarianism, discipline or other forms of power and (political) resistance; (c) feminist and postcolonial deconstructions of concepts like rationality, recognition and desire, which question, e.g. the specific situating of the subject (cf. Masschelein 1998; Pongratz et al. 2004; Allen 2016).

Therefore, the reception of international critical perspectives – that in many different ways take into account the problem of the foundation of the critical position itself – seems to make sense in light of the project of a thorough and unrelenting analysis of social grievances (cf. Boltanski 2010). Moreover, the proximity to

Foucauldian analyses of power mechanisms and practises are discussed. These discussions focus, for example, on problems surrounding autonomy and self-realisation, pointing to the ideology and reversal of these concepts, especially in institutional educational contexts. Perhaps, what we are currently facing is precisely, as Judith Butler puts it with regard to Foucault and Adorno, the challenge “to rethink critique as a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing” (Butler 2001).

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