Critical Theory After the Rise of the Global South

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We are beginning to acknowledge that the social world changed fundamentally between 1989 and 2008.[1] Two centuries of Euro-American domination have come to an end and have given way to a multicentric structure that has prevailed throughout most of history.[2] As the social sciences have emerged during two centuries of Euro-American domination and as our collective memory hardly knows a different world order, our view of the social world—in the social sciences as in everyday life—is based on an abnormal state of things. The rise of the global South that came to the fore after 1989 urges us to review the core assumptions of the social sciences, as they are neither apt to explain the present nor suitable to the remote past, nor acceptable to the postcolonial world.[3]

If it is true that the Euro-American experience does not entirely fit the experience of all other world regions at all times, the empirical basis of the social sciences has to be enlarged. Area studies, indigenous sociologies and global studies are in the process of doing this. On this basis, the social sciences will also have to review their theories that rely exclusively on the Euro-American experience because this has been the dominant reality and the supposed model for all other societies ever since the emergence of the

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social sciences. Finally, one has to reflect upon the epistemological foundations of the social sciences. This is what I propose to do in this chapter. I wish to outline how the social sciences could react to recent changes. I will restrict my argument to the tradition called critical theory because it relies on Eurocentric assumptions to an outstanding degree at the same time as it comprises epistemological ideas that are particularly suitable for a multicentric world. I first outline some of the Eurocentric foundations of critical theory and then confront them with the rise of the global South and its implications, the most important being an all-encompassing relativism. In the third section of the chapter, I wish to draw some conclusions for epistemology from the confrontation and its implications. Finally, I advance some considerations on post-Eurocentric ethics.

CRITICAL THEORY

Critical Theory is based on Hegel's dialectical understanding of the world. In his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 1970 [1807]), Hegel interpreted the human realm as an unfolding of knowledge, which presupposed the development of society and its understanding. According to Hegel, the historical development (or evolution) of social differentiation, language and science set the boundaries for practice and theory (1807: XXXI, 389, 451). Individual knowledge and action both had to draw on what was actually available in society. Any invention was a synthesis of already developed ideas and practices and of two antagonistic elements, which Hegel called a "contradiction" (1807: XLII, 16). The contradiction was, for Hegel, the motor of the history of society and of ideas, as everything was determined by its negation (or contradiction). Theory and practice, according to Hegel, thereby developed from the simple to the more complex and synthetic, while theory always remained within the boundaries of practice because it was merely its reflection.

Hegel claimed that, in his time, theory and practice had developed to such a degree that knowledge of the entire history of society and of ideas had become possible (1807: 12, 754). He was able to review the history of human society and the history of knowledge as a series of contradictions. Each contradiction was resolved in theory and practice. Hegel called this resolution "*Aufhebung*": One recognized that both sides of the contradiction depended on each other and therefore formed an identity (1807: 10). This led to a new level of knowledge—or a new perspective on the world—that again comprised a defining contradiction. Solving the

contradiction, lifting it to a new level and keeping it in mind is the triple meaning of *Aufhebung*. Hegel termed this way of thinking "dialectic". The full understanding of history was for him as much a dialectic as the historical process itself (1807: XXIX, XLII). He claimed to understand the entire history because reality and knowledge had reached their fulfilment and final *Aufhebung* in the modern European nation state. Social structures and theory had developed to the degree that a full knowledge of human history was possible (1807: XX).

Marx followed Hegel's theory in most regards. However, he insisted on the difference between theory and practice and also claimed that the real society did not have to be the best society, not even the society that was best under the given historical circumstances. This is why Marx called his version of Hegel's dialectic a *critical* theory (Marx 1985 [1867]: 22). He demanded "to *topple all conditions*, under which the human being is a humiliated, an enslaved, a lonely and a despised being" (Marx 1976 [1845]: 385; my translation). This, for Marx, was an issue of practice that had to realize the best society in the future which was not realized in the present—whereas for Hegel, the present society had to be the best society because no other society was conceivable at the current time.

The foundations of critical theory were laid by Marx's transformation of Hegel. They comprise at least the following claims: The human being is determined historically and socially, there is an historical evolution to the higher that finds its fulfilment in an ideal-typical Europe, the unit of analysis is the totality of the social world that is characterized by the contradiction, the social world has to be analyzed dialectically, and the totality has to be analyzed critically because and to the degree that it has not realized a good life (cf. Marx 1985 [1844]: 538ff.; 1969 [1857]).

In the mid-twentieth century, Hegel's and Marx's optimistic attitudes towards the development of history and knowledge had become questionable. Their theoretical claims were confronted with a reality that did not seem to be evolving towards the best society but towards an apocalypse. Adorno further elaborated critical theory against this background. He agreed with Hegel and Marx that the human being was determined by society and its history (Adorno 1996: 261). All theory and practice had to draw on the existing stock of ideas and actions: The boundaries of society therefore were the boundaries of the thinkable. If that is true, one wonders how reflection could ever transcend reality and conceive of a better life than the existing one. Hegel had chosen the obvious answer and said this was not possible and that the existing life was the best life; while Marx

had chosen to postpone the answer by saying that the existing contradictions would require resolution and drive reality towards a future better life.

As Adorno did not share this positive attitude towards the present or future, he had to show how the critique of a society was possible in a society that entirely determined any critique (as it was a totality). He tried to show this in a theory he termed *Negative Dialectic* (*Negative Dialektik*, 1975). It differed from Hegel's dialectic in its negative relation to the social totality (Adorno 1979 [1951]: 57). Adorno argued that this totality comprised elements that pointed beyond it. He called these elements "non-identical". Thinking in a non-identical manner means, for Adorno, starting any analysis with the totality in order to show that each phenomenon is determined by the totality but not entirely. He claimed that there was more to reality than the contradictions presented by Hegel and Marx. He looked for the "waste and blind spots that escaped the dialectic … What transcends existing society is not only the potential developed by it but also that which did not really fit its historical laws" (Adorno 1979 [1951]: 200; my translation).

In Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1979 [1951]) the idea of a "redeemed" state of society opens up the possibility of intellectually transcending real society. Adorno bases the possibility on the epistemological argument that the universal does not entirely comprise and define the singular and on the empirical argument that one experiences moments of redemption and happiness which point towards a state of society that differs from the present one. These two arguments are combined in the fundamental claim of the *Negative Dialectic* (1975) that the totality is untrue because it promises a state of redemption—or the best life—which it has not realized.

Both these books and their basic arguments appeared after the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1984 [1944]), which Adorno had written with Horkheimer. They also draw on the philosophy of history presented in this early work. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* outlines a unilinear evolution of improved human power over nature, very much as Hegel and Marx had done before. However, this evolution does not culminate in the best life but in an untrue totality that not only destroys nature but also transforms society into a totalitarian system (1984 [1944]: 10, 32, 113). According to Adorno, "the most advanced consciousness" was capable of criticizing this untrue totality (1996: 249). However, he did not explain why the most advanced consciousness should discern the less advanced consciousness as untrue or even what that most advanced consciousness was.

The philosophy of history led Adorno into a self-contradiction, an aporetic impasse. It subsumed the singular under the universal, just as Hegel had done. And knowledge did not remain critical by pointing to unkept promises of real society but claimed to be able to transcend real society from a point within that society. Adorno at once demanded total (negative) critique and proposed a (positive) interpretation of history. This is because he claimed to know right from wrong in an objective, super-historical manner. Habermas (1988: 144) explained: "Adorno was fully aware of this performative contradiction of a totalizing critique". He did not resolve the contradiction because he stuck to Hegel's and Marx's foundations of critical theory without sharing their optimism in history.

THE RISE OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The foundations of critical theory are linked to Europe's dominant position in the world. They are Eurocentric and presuppose a homogeneous social world. In a way, the real world between Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and Adorno's *Negative Dialectic* actually corresponded to this idea, as the globe basically consisted of Europe, Europeanized regions and European colonies. The world was an imperial totality whose components had no independent existence and no sustainable traditions but who had to follow the European model of society. The core dictated the criteria for development and knowledge. Europe was this core well into the twentieth century, to be overtaken by the USA for much of the "short twentieth century". This world belongs to the past. The foundations of Eurocentrism are being shattered.

In this chapter I wish to take issue with four of these foundations. These four foundations were self-evident in a Euro-American world but they have become questionable after the rise of the global South. First, Euro-American modernity cannot be regarded as the goal of development any more, simply because Europe and the USA no longer lead development in some categories. Second, unilinear evolution is a misleading framework for the understanding of history because most historical phenomena are neither evolutionary nor teleological. Third, we have not found universal laws of history, yet. Fourth, no object of the social sciences is a totality, not even the globalized world, because any individual object relates to others.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 relations between First and Third Worlds have changed fundamentally. Cities, subregions and

entire countries of the Third World have entered the First World, while parts of the First World have to be, in all relevant categories, classified as Third World. The Third World is transforming into a complex mosaic of emerging nation states, global nodes and impoverished subregions. It can no longer be clearly delimited from the First World. It would certainly be ridiculous to classify South Korea or Malaysia, Iran or Venezuela as Third World at this point. Despite widespread poverty even the huge nation states of Brazil, China and India no longer fulfil the criteria of being a Third World country. They host some of the richest individuals, leading hi-tech centres and the largest middle classes in the world, while continuously achieving more than five per cent economic growth per year (as opposed to minus three to plus two per cent in the West).

If we apply the conventional categories of the media and the social sciences, we must acknowledge the rise of the global South as a fact, even if it meets all kinds of obstacles and setbacks. There is no doubt that the global South now plays an important role in the categories of industrialization, trade, finance, politics, education and demography. And the Southern economies have been growing at a much faster pace than the established ones for at least a decade. This is unlikely to change for many years to come. China will be awarded the gold medal in most economic disciplines in the near future.

It is well known that centres of manufacturing are growing in the global South, while de-industrialization is the main story in the North (Dicken 2003: 38). Nodes in Brazil, China and India that combine cheap labour with good infrastructure and decent education have become the global factories, while Europe's and North America's share in manufacturing have been decreasing in the last decade (Nederveen Pieterse 2009: 15). The global South also plays an increasing role in trade (Winters and Yusuf 2007). China has become the leading exporter to the world. At the same time, the growing importance of raw materials strengthens the position of raw material exporters, who have hitherto been regarded as the incarnation of dependency theory. The reorientation of manufacturing and trade flows is linked to a new financial geography. Global money reserves are now being stocked in Abu Dhabi, Beijing and Caracas, rather than London and Washington. Without access to these reserves, the global North is close to declaring bankruptcy (cf. Prestowitz 2005).

The global economic crisis illustrated the new economic structure of the world very clearly. The crisis was a financial crisis of the North. It had virtually no economic impact on the emerging Asian economies. However,

it had a huge symbolic impact. Trust in neoliberalism and the capacity of Western capitalism has been shattered. The international system run by the IMF and the World Bank (or, for that matter, by the United States) is not relevant to the twenty-first century. Regional agreements and South-South cooperation are beginning to replace that system, in spite of Wall Street's and Washington's persisting gravitational forces. The same holds true for a world politics that is no longer conceivable without the South's participation (Harris 2005). What is more, South-South cooperation increasingly circumvents the North, while international agreements need Beijing's and Delhi's consent, at least to the same degree as Washington's.

It is likely that the rise of the global South will continue. It may even accelerate. An increasing focus on education and R&D in countries such as India and China will gradually shift global centres of knowledge and hi-tech to the South. While American and European public universities are virtually broke, Chinese and Indian professors are receiving a yearly salary hike. Demography also speaks in favour of the global South. Almost 50 per cent of Northern populations consist of retired persons and do not expect any major change as fertility rates remain low. At the same time, half the population in most Southern countries is below 18 years of age. The North hopes to draw on immigration but as its economic conditions worsen (and are often coupled with xenophobia), young Indians prefer to stay at home, especially those working in hi-tech, even though cutting-edge businesses in the global North are eagerly chasing after them.

For the time being the states making up the global South are neither a real nor a unified counterweight to the states of the global North (Palat 2009). In particular, they are in no position to contest US military power. They also have to struggle with inequality, administrative inefficiency, rural crises, political fragmentation, weak financial institutions, environmental problems and energy scarcity. Finally, per capita incomes in the South are still only a small percentage of average Northern incomes. However, the historical tendency very clearly leads from Euro-American domination back to the multicentric world that has characterized most of human history (Abu-Lughod 1989; Frank 1998). Neither political institutions nor Western public spheres nor the social sciences have properly reacted to this new/old structure of the world.

Eurocentric theory could remain indifferent to the rise of the global South if the South still followed the model of European society and development. This assumption has become illogical since China now leads the way in several categories. This is simple logic: If the global South leads the

global North in at least one category, it cannot be lagging behind and cannot follow the Western model of society (any more). Obviously, Euro-American modernity is not the "end of history", as Fukuyama (1992) claimed on similar grounds to Hegel's. One might be tempted to predict that China might become the model for development. This is unlikely. In a multicentric world, developments overlap, intermingle and modify each other.

This intermingling probably characterized history much better than unilinear evolution because the world seemed to have been multicentric before the rise of Europe in the eighteenth century (Pomeranz 2000; Hobson 2004). In fact, from the Stone Age to early modernity, most historical periods and regions existed in a more or less multicentric configuration (Stein 1999; Abu-Lughod 1989; Hodgson 1993). Eurocentric theory seems to apply exactly to the period and the region in which it emerged. This is precisely the world in which Hegel, Marx and Adorno lived. More generally, it is the framework of our social sciences.

Critical theory now needs to revise the four foundations mentioned above since it has become increasingly difficult to understand the world beyond the short-lived European domination on that basis. No region has had a history of unilinear evolution. No universal historical laws have been discovered. And no object can be defined as a totality. Indians and Chinese will say that Hegel's spirit or Adorno's totality have been confined to Europe. They will add that Europe never defined all elements of Indian or Chinese societies and that it plays a decreasing role for them and for the world at large.

This is relevant not just for one specific theory. In a multicentric world no society can prescribe its order and ideas to other societies. Indians and Chinese advance similar claims to truth and virtue—and they begin to be able to underline these claims with economic and political power similar to that of Europe and the USA. No form of life can be taken for granted any more, even less as the best form of life. No foundation of theory, no epistemology, has universal validity at this point. This leads to relativism in epistemology and ethics. A host of "post" theories—such as poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism—have been calling for pluralism in epistemology and ethics for decades. The theory and practice one chooses is supposed to be a matter of choice or accident (Feyerabend 1975). After the rise of the global South, pluralism is not an idle academic issue but it has become a central problem in theory and practice. The question is: What can be considered a valid criterion for theory or practice

if incommensurable traditions are confronted with others that do not even share the foundations that had been self-evident to Hegel, Marx and Adorno?

A Kaleidoscopic Dialectic

To this question, I wish to propose an answer beyond relativism and universalism. The determination by society and history has to be strictly understood as a *hermeneutical* situation. This was the basis of Hegel's approach, and this is why I began the chapter with a discussion of his approach. The approach has been developed further by Gadamer (1960) for the humanities: Knowledge is only possible in an existing society on the basis of its history and can merely make use of the means it produces. However, in a post-Eurocentric world, the situation has to be interpreted in an entirely new way, as the history that contemporary hermeneutics would have to look at is no longer a homogeneous (Eurocentric) history with common foundations—if it ever was. Adorno's insistence on the impossibility of transcending society not only places a limit on knowledge but it also becomes a great opportunity under present conditions. If histories and societies actually differ fundamentally from each other, it becomes possible to transcend one's "own" society. In Gadamer's hermeneutics, one can merely interpret what was already given because there is only one tradition to interpret (the European tradition, of course), and this basically is also true for Hegel's dialectic. In a post-Eurocentric world, however, one can actually learn something new, something that has not been known before. This is a real hermeneutics that comprises the "non-identical" as a matter of principle, cannot be reduced to universal laws, does not aim at a totality and does not presuppose a unilinear evolution toward a certain goal.

Adorno provides us with an instrument for this hermeneutics, as he was looking for a method that would be neither purely descriptive nor universalizing and deductive. He did not fully develop this method but he used it in many of his analyses. He termed it "constellation" or "configuration". According to Adorno, the analysis of an object as configuration is based on the insight that the causal chains and relations of the object are endless as a matter of principle (1975: 263). Causal thinking implies the identity of the object and linear cause–effect relations, while the concept of configuration denies these two presuppositions (1975: 31). It has three main characteristics that oppose causal thinking: first, the search for (a

multitude of) relations of the object; second, the exploration of its history; and third, the *Aufhebung* of its apparent independence (1975: 164).

On the basis of Adorno's concept of configuration, I wish to outline a kaleidoscopic dialectic as the epistemological core of a post-Eurocentric critical theory.[4] Central to a kaleidoscopic dialectic, as for Adorno's configuration, is the relational approach—establishing relations and exploring history. The multitude of relations cannot be reduced to a series of contradictions. While classical dialectic knows only one type of relation, one should acknowledge that there are many different types, such as temporal succession, similarity, attraction, generation or domination. Hegel's philosophy of nature was already a bit ridiculous in trying to reduce all these relations to the contradiction and it is not easily understood why critical theory had such trouble moving beyond that reduction. Adorno's third characteristic, the *Aufhebung* of an apparent independence, follows from the multitude of relations. While Adorno related this *Aufhebung* to the totality, I merely point to relations. I claim that the notion of totality is one of the Eurocentric foundations of critical theory that have to be overcome.

Against this background I propose three characteristics that are central to a kaleidoscopic dialectic. First, the object has to be constructed as a configuration on the level of the *particular*. Second, it has to be linked to a clearly defined *empirical* field. Third, it has to be constructed historically, but without any teleology, out of an *origin*. In contrast to Hegel and Marx, Adorno has not distinguished between the singular, the particular or the universal. In my opinion, we do not grasp the universal or the singular, but the intermediate levels that Hegel and Marx termed the "particular". We tend to look for general statements and universal concepts. When we think we have found one, we feel we are standing on solid ground. We believe that we should and do find irrefutable truths. I also think we should strive toward the *more* universal—but any universal remains relative (or rather, relational) and therefore not universal but particular. The important thing seems to me to *start with the assumption* that we neither can nor should discover irrefutable truths. This would significantly alter the epistemology that has prevailed ever since Galilei and Descartes.

Deleuze has argued against Hegel that concepts are singularities (Deleuze and Guattari 1991: 38). He is probably right in that each use of a concept is singular. But not all concepts are equal. They are not even equally relative but refer to a different number and type of objects. Deleuze

denies this difference. Universal terms and names are equally singular to him. I would counter that the singularity of the term "one" is not the same as the singularity of the term "Obama". These concepts are located on different levels. And it is precisely this difference that makes science possible as a process of gaining knowledge—as opposed to merely accumulating information.

Laclau (1996) argues against Deleuze and postcolonialism that the singular always presupposed a social totality. The negation of the concept of totality therefore also negates the concept of singularity. Laclau bases his argument on Saussure's theory of science that constructs a system of differences. In this system, each determination is a difference that presupposes the totality of differences in order to have a meaning. Laclau adds that this totality is not something to be known as subject or substance in Hegel's sense but has to be presupposed as an empty or vacant space. Totality in this view is merely the totality of all differences. Laclau argues convincingly that our view of history implies the concept of totality because we presuppose an evolution out of a common origin, while our logic implies the concept of totality because one identical form is reckoned to fit any content. Laclau himself only retains the notion of an empty place from the concept of totality.

I wish to discard even this notion of an empty place. In an *ontological* sense, we do not know if all beings share a common origin. It is even doubtful if all human beings are descendents of a single species—that is, if all histories are rooted in one origin and are therefore branches of a single, common history. The reduction of histories to one history out of a common origin is a reminder of Einstein's attempt to find the "world formula" or of current attempts to explain everything human from a cell or a genome. The reduction presupposes that all traits of the historically later are contained in the historically earlier. I regard this is as a misconception. What invariably happens is that any explanation adds supporting information or marginal conditions that are *not* contained in the description of the antecedents or the historically earlier (cf. Hempel 1965). Therefore, we should start from the opposite assumption: No two objects can be reduced to a common origin, let alone deduced from it.

However, even Laclau's *logical* argument for retaining the concept of totality is not convincing. Adorno wrote that relations and causal chains are endless. For this reason, there are a lot of possibilities to explain any given phenomenon on the basis of general statements or universal "laws". Each level of explanation, each interest, each discipline, each method and

virtually each glance results in a different description of the phenomenon, even if it remains identical (which is not usually the case). This results in the pluralism that is characteristic in "post" theories. One can now choose between arbitrarily reducing the pluralism to some origin or universal law or just accepting it (Feyerabend 1975).

The kaleidoscopic dialectic is supposed to offer a third option by regarding law and marginal condition as an inseparable, or possibly even identical, unit. In the logic that Laclau points to, a law is independent of the phenomenon. I do not think so. One should regard laws as emerging historically together with phenomena. The abstraction from history and objects makes it seem as if they were universally applicable. But if a law is defined in a sufficiently precise manner, it only applies to the realm of the phenomenon with which it emerged. This is the "particular". Some laws apply to many phenomena, some to few—but none to all and none to just one.

Each configuration implies universal statements and laws. But these apply only to the respective configuration. Therefore, it is essential to define the scope of each configuration or general statement. Each configuration remains open, as new relations appear and new relations are discovered (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1991). We use our universal concepts a bit naively, like children learning a language. They acquire the word "ball" with respect to a certain object that grown-ups call "ball". We also believe in induction and think our limited insights hold true for an infinite number of cases we would actually never be able to explore. After being able to utter the word, children will first call everything (or all things they consider similar) a "ball". In science, we should confine the term to the realm of objects where we learnt to use the term and then extend its use on an empirical basis, step by step. This is done by looking for further relations and by looking at the history of the object.

The idea of an origin, of a goal of evolution and knowledge and of a universal logic is supposed to reduce multitude and pluralism to something simple—in the last resort, a tautology or a contradiction. Some natural scientists may still be trying to reduce all perspectives to the one, overarching and correct perspective of a world formula. In the social sciences these attempts have become dubious because there are as many perspectives on society as there are perspectives in society. Hegel claimed this multitude did not matter for an explanation of the world and tried to reduce it to a few universal concepts and statements. However, this meant that most of what we know about the social world, and most of what exists

in the social world, was excluded from science. Hegel was perfectly aware of this. In the social sciences we know not too little but too much. The reduction of this multitude to a few statements is based on the ideal of a homogeneous society that realizes itself out of a common, single origin in the European universal.

The goal of a kaleidoscopic dialectic consists neither in finding universal laws nor in describing singularities nor in portraying the entire human history but in the knowledge of relations. There are many different kinds of relations. Contradiction is merely one type, which does not even contribute very much to our knowledge. Similarity is a more interesting and important relation than contradiction. Similarities in the social sciences are basically what Wittgenstein called "family resemblances"—a host of different, irreducible commonalities. It is not possible to reduce the objects of the social sciences to general laws and universal concepts because they are not defined by general laws and universal concepts. Wittgenstein uses a family as an example. All members of a given family have things in common but no two have exactly the same traits in common as any other two. "Different resemblances between the members of a family intermingle and criss-cross: stature, face, colour of the eyes, gait, temper … We see a complex net of resemblances that intermingle and criss-cross. Big and small resemblances." (Wittgenstein 1984 [1953]: 66; my translation) One can "explain" these resemblances by tracing their history but one cannot reduce them to universal laws. One family member's face was altered by an accident, another's stature was altered by his profession and yet another's through the influence of hormones. The explanation of all these singularities not only involves an endless causal chain but also an explanation of the world—including all other singularities because it would have to comprise all families and all influences.

One could now reply that it is exactly this explanation of the world that science had to strive for, a Hegel without teleology out of an origin. Until this explanation was reached, we could not really know the singular and the universal except in a presumptuous, hypothetical manner. And this means, *not at all.* For there is no abduction that is located between the singular and the universal, between induction and deduction, and that comes ever closer to the truth (cf. Peirce 1958: 368). Knowledge is open and incomplete, not only in an empirical sense but also in an epistemological one. First, reality does not end in the moment of its full explanation, neither with Hegel nor anyone else. Second, as Adorno put it, causal chains are endless—one can always find new relations and family

resemblances, which means that there is no final explanation. All that we can come up with are configurations that are more general than others, as they comprise more objects and more relations.

To establish relations between heterogeneous configurations—to construct kaleidoscopes—seems to me an epistemological device that fits our multicentric world. Incommensurable systems of science and ethics now confront each other. Factually, they exist side by side. They have their scope, for which they retain a certain plausibility. As these realms increasingly intermingle and criss-cross, they cannot ignore each other any more. They cease to exist side by side and begin to establish relations. This leads to the problem of translation so prominent in "post" theories. A universalistic approach would claim that translation needs a standard, a "third language" to correctly convey meanings, while relativism would hold that translation in the strong sense is impossible. A kaleidoscopic approach would construct two configurations that bear a family resemblance but that are irreducible to each other or to a third. No common standard and no indifference but relations. In fact, the notion of translation itself is already misleading because in translation one of the configurations is lost. The goal is to be bilingual (or better yet, multilingual) rather than reducing one language to another. Each language has its own semantics and its own differentiations. Therefore, learning a new language opens up new perspectives and configurations. The same is true for any system of knowledge, for any scientific approach, for any form of life. In order to make use of them, one has to learn their perspectives and to put them into relation. A kaleidoscopic dialectic explores which system applies to which realm of objects by confronting them with each other without presupposing a general explanation or origin or even a common standard.

Understanding

The social world does not merely consist of different systems that are investigated from a different perspective because each perspective is part of the social world itself. This implies that all of these perspectives have to figure in any configuration and that the social world looks different from each perspective. These implications not only have an epistemological relevance but also an ethical one that leads back to the critical aspect of critical theory that has been developed further by the last major representative of Eurocentric critical theory, Habermas (1984).

Neither Wittgenstein nor Adorno really acknowledged the fact that other human beings are also knowing beings. This fact means that the object of the social sciences can criticize a scientific statement—which is not the case in the natural sciences. If science ascribes a human being certain characteristics, he or she may question this ascription. He or she may even question the underlying paradigm and propose a different one on a reflexive level. This is a point that has been made by postcolonialism and postmodernism.

However, the point does not imply that all interpretations and perspectives are equal or equally valid. Rather, it implies that social sciences need to include understanding—in a double sense. First, one has to understand the object and second one has to seek an understanding with others. To understand the object not only implies understanding its meaning—e.g. of a statement or action—but also understanding the other's perspective. One cannot and need not put oneself into the other's shoes or take their place Mead (1934) because this is not possible, but one has to simulate their perspective (Stein 1917). This is a hypothetical and conceptual construct just as in any other scientific endeavour. It differs from other scientific constructs in so far as it refers to a phenomenon that is not an object but a perspective, or rather "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger 1962). This form of understanding has to be coupled with a mutual understanding. One has to communicate with others—including the object—about the object and about its being-in-the-world. Neither type of understanding aims at a consensus. To understand calls for an empirical test and mutual understanding calls for an acceptance of other perspectives.

In the social sciences we have to understand meaning and to simulate how people involved in the realm of study are in the world. Only on this basis is one in a position to interpret and explain their actions appropriately. Interpretation and explanation may even teach the scientist something for his or her own life. Whoever does not methodologically include understanding in the study, runs the risk of fantasizing—and of interpreting a game of chess as a spirit calling and a spiritual healing as a game.[5] Understanding is possible because all forms of being-in-the-world bear a family resemblance. But they cannot be reduced to a common basic form or replaced by a one and only true perspective on the world.

Without an effort to understand, any mutual understanding implies symbolic violence. Spivak (1999) argued against Habermas' ideal of a consensus that the oppressed do not have a language of their own and are therefore forced to agree with the oppressor when his language is used.

For this reason, one has to know why someone agrees in the process of mutual understanding. This is only possible on the basis of an effort to understand him or her (i.e. by simulating a being-in-the-world). One actually has to make an effort to understand in order to transcend provincialism and to reach a mutual understanding in a globalized world. In the same way that forms of life differ greatly in the world, perspectives, standards and actions diverge to a substantial degree. Perspectives have to be organized as a configuration with varying relations between elements. Any understanding opens up a new perspective and thereby new aspects of reality, even though any configuration in its entirety remains a limited kaleidoscope and not the totality of the social world.

To understand others and to reach an understanding with them is not only a necessary component of epistemology in the social sciences but it is also relevant in pursuit of the best—or rather, a better—life. Each perspective implies a different idea of the best life. Hegel, Marx, Adorno and Habermas presupposed *one* best life for all. And they did this without any effort to understand other human beings. The idea of a universal theory of society and a clear definition of the best society presupposes, just as in any other universalistic conception, that society can be fully known in its totality or at least be based on some evident, irrefutable truths. However, we can only imagine the best society on the basis and within the framework of the existing society, as Adorno has argued. Engels illustrated the point by saying that a dog's heaven was a pile of bones. For this reason, any idea of the best society will remain imperfect—and social technology a meaningless endeavour. Therefore, social theory has to be a critical theory whose only goal is to improve the existing society as a configuration and in relation to other societies.

A critical theory for a multicentric world is looking for empirically saturated, and in their extension clearly defined, configurations on the level of the particular by constructing and analyzing as many relations as possible. Each configuration has to imply understanding in both meanings explored above. As a critical theory, its rationale is a better life (or being-in-the-world). It has to ask with regard to each configuration: Is the life judged best by the respective society—or social configuration—realized here? The question has to be answered in relation to the respective society or configuration and through a hermeneutical circle of empirical research and (double) understanding. This approach is not relativistic because science is in a position to advance a critique of an existing society or configuration by confronting it with its own concept

of the best life (just as Adorno has proposed) and by confronting it with other societies and their concepts of the best life.

Conclusion

While the best life was the ultimate criterion for Marx and Adorno, a joint search for a better life may be the criterion for the post-Eurocentric world. The best life is relative to a given configuration. The rise of the global South incites discussion about standards of theory and practice. In this discussion, the idea of the best life can be equivalent to a regulative idea. The discussion should be conceived as mutual learning. Learning is knowledge and experience at the same time, theory and ethics—if it aims at a better life. The application of critical theory thereby becomes an improvement of life, an ethical practice, itself. This is a hermeneutical interpretation of critical theory—but not in a Eurocentric and universalistic sense. When Hegel said philosophy was nothing but the time put into thought, he meant that the known had to be thought through—that one only learns what one already knows. Now, all of us can learn something that we do not know.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on lectures given at Humboldt-Universität Berlin and Clark University, Worchester (USA). I am grateful to the audiences for their comments.
2. In this chapter I do not use the terms Europe, Western Europe, North America, West or global North with any precise meaning or distinction. What is meant, is the world region that has dominated the world during the past two centuries.
3. I will speak of the global South, and at times couple it with the term global North, at times with the term West and at times with Europe and North America. This confusion of terminology perfectly reflects the point I want to make in the first two sections of the chapter.
4. I prefer the word kaleidoscope because the terms configuration and constellation already have rather developed meanings in other traditions. (I am also hesitant to confound a Greek and a Latin term.)
5. Of course, any explanation in the social sciences involves understanding—even if it is restricted to the meaning of the words used in the explanation. However, understanding has to be anchored in the methodology in order to include differing perspectives on the object and within the object and to be able to test one's own claims.

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