
The Frankfurt School: Philosophy and (political) economy: A thematic introduction by the editors

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Abstract

The following introduction has two parts: the first part provides a sketch of the Frankfurt School's history, highlighting the circumstances under which the authors discussed in this issue engaged philosophically with matters of economy. We thereby follow the prevailing periodization, starting with the school's foundation in 1924 and ending with Theodor W. Adorno's death in 1969 and the school's preliminary dissolution. The second part of the introduction explores the legacy of the Frankfurt School's philosophical critique of economy. Max Horkheimer's writings thereby serve as a model case for such a critique and become the point of departure for the discussion of contemporary critical theories of the economic.

Keywords

critical theory, Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer, philosophy, political economy

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I Historical perspective: The precariousness of societal contradictions (Matthias Rothe)

These were the good times when it was still possible to write a critique of the political economy of this society. (Adorno, 2012[1916]: 284)

I The scope of critique (defining totality)

This issue of *History of the Human Sciences* discusses various theorists from the Frankfurt School of Social Research and from their immediate environment, among them authors that have rarely been the center of attention: Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Georg Lukács, Henryk Grossmann, Friedrich Pollock, Otto Kirchheimer, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Such a collection of thinkers might seem odd, yet this constellation of disciplinary provenances¹ and theoretical stances makes visible the first concern at hand: the presentation of a diversity of Marxisms and of a broad range of engagements with political economy and economy at large within Critical Theory (a term that has become a synonym for the Frankfurt School endeavor since Max Horkheimer's 1937 'manifesto', 'Traditional and Critical Theory' [2002a]). Such diversity can be discerned only after defining the ground that these theorists nevertheless have in common: the assumption that society is a whole and that society's totality can be grasped from the point of view of its mode(s) of reproduction. Marx's political economy then – employing such categories as value, profit, class, relations of production and forces of production – was widely understood as an outstanding attempt to capture such totality, that is, it was seen as breaking through the surface level of phenomena and accessing the very foundation of society.

There is also agreement on at least one enemy, commonly named positivism. The target was the largely empiricist orientation of the social and, in particular, of the economic sciences. In 1928, Alfred Sohn-Rethel² gave a poignant description of the problem attendant on such empiricism. Most contemporary economic theories, Sohn-Rethel maintained, detach the economic sphere from the social. For better or worse, he claimed, economic science had, since its foundation in the late 18th century, been conceived as a social science [*Gesellschaftswissenschaft*]. Economic practices had been understood with reference to reason or freedom; they had been derived from history, as part of the evolution of society, or, at least, had been thought of in close relation to social institutions that were themselves subject to change. 'The equation of economy and social science is severed', he stated dryly (Sohn-Rethel, 2012[1928]: 228 [trans. M. R.]). Economy was now presumed to be merely activity or behavior that could be studied empirically and – reconceptualized along these lines – it came to be understood as a timeless rationality. In the very successful school of marginalism, for example, it was redefined as the (individual) calculation of costs and benefits. Such a move had immensely important consequences, according to Sohn-Rethel. Paradoxically, it was this limitation in scope that made economic thinking – thinking in terms of costs and benefits – ubiquitous and led to an economization of previously spared spheres of life. In other

words, the social or societal, of which economic relations are but one part, disappeared from view in favor of an idea of society that comprised the activity of calculating and atomized individual actors. Economic practices themselves no longer had to stand up to (social) criticism; the only form of critique that remained possible was that of experts. Yet it is worth noting that, for Sohn-Rethel, this was but a side concern, merely a symptom of a much bigger problem: once the bond between economy and society was severed or – which amounted to the same thing for the theorists assembled in this issue – once a concept of totality was abandoned, critique as such loses its scope, whatever its specific target might be.

But the agreement ended when it came to defining totality. The debate quickly became one about the lasting validity of Marx's categories. Does Marx's political economy provide only a model for understanding society's totality? If so, can and must analogous categories be found? Or are Marx's concepts flexible enough to account for contemporary (and future) societal developments? At stake, in particular, was the assumption that all societal dynamics and thus all hope for emancipation can be located in the antagonism between the relations of production and the forces of production. The forces of production, or the productive capacities including needs and expectations that develop with them, the story commonly went, will ultimately come into irreconcilable conflict with the relations of production, that is, the way the forces are put to use, namely through the free market and private ownership, and thus produce capitalism's final crisis. Such interpretation of Marx was at the heart of the revolutionary program as well as of the Social Democratic reformist agenda since the 19th century. The arrival of socialism, the superior order that could accommodate and foster society's productive capacities, appeared to be inscribed in the course of history.

The Frankfurt School 'officially' changed course on most of these questions in 1931, when Max Horkheimer took over its directorship. Since 1924, its mission had been the institutionalization of Marxist research methods with a focus on the history of the working class. Marxism was understood as a science investigating 'social existence in its never-ending, constantly renewed transformation' (Grünberg cit. in Wiggershaus, 1994[1986]: 26). The general direction of these perpetual changes was not at issue and Carl Grünberg, the institute's first director, was not shy about professing his conviction of the lasting effectiveness of the antagonisms between productive forces and relations at the institute's inauguration: 'Many people, whose numbers and influence are constantly growing ... are firmly, scientifically convinced ... that we are in the midst of the transition from capitalism to socialism and are advancing towards the latter with gathering speed' (ibid.: 25). Thus history's tendencies could be read out of the empirical data by means of Marx's famous categories.

Horkheimer's inaugural speech suggested a different perspective. He argued for a 'dialectical penetration ... of philosophical theory and specialized scientific praxis' (Horkheimer, 1993[1931]: 8–9). He spoke about the importance of Kant and Hegel. This new emphasis on philosophical theory should not be understood as a departure from economics: 'The economy is the first cause of wretchedness, and critique, theoretical and practical, must address itself primarily to it' (Horkheimer, 1986[1937]: 249). Thus seen, Horkheimer remained faithful to the Marxist tradition. Rather, the problem was economic reductionism in all its forms, including the one now practised by

traditional Marxism: the reification of Marx's political economy; its translation into historical laws and the subsequent complacent (mechanical) application of Marxian categories to all social phenomena. 'Economism to which critical theory is often reduced', Horkheimer stated in 1937, 'does not consist in giving too much importance to economy, but in giving it too narrow a scope' (ibid.: 249). And 'too narrow a scope' had the precise meaning of, on the one hand, failing to address phenomena as parts of a societal whole and, on the other, not taking into account that society is an open totality whose constitution is contingent upon the changes of its parts, that is, ultimately it is grounded in the materiality of the existing social relations. Philosophy – idealist philosophy, which had preceded and developed into Marxism – was assigned the task of preserving the awareness of such constitutive openness. At the same time, philosophy was set up as an antidote to traditional Marxism and to the empiricism of the social sciences (see next section). Its cautionary tale went by the name of metaphysics, a label assigned to philosophical enquiry whenever it loses touch with the materiality of the social world and instead proposes a transcendental foundation (be it in the relation and forces of production, in being as such, or in subjectivity).

Much could be said about Horkheimer's dictatorial policies that could not but compromise the institute's anti-authoritarian stance. They were effects of the institute's legal set-up: the Society for Social Research, a foundation created by Felix Weil – Marxist, economist and principal sponsor – provided the institute's financial resources and board of trustees and also transferred to the director far-reaching powers pertaining to hiring and firing, salaries and the administration of finances; powers that Horkheimer seems to have applied: *divide et impera*.³ Yet the (new) direction announced by Horkheimer in 1931 did not end the diversity of positions. On the contrary, it produced such diversity by bringing the theoretical and political stakes out into the open. The variety of positions presented by the institute's journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (from 1939 *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences*), dedicated to showcase and to archive its work, is impressive. Invited contributors included, for example, Ferdinand Tönnies (1935), Otto Neurath (1937) and Alexander Koyré (1938) and the variety within the close-knit circle of Frankfurt School theorists is perhaps best exemplified by the numerous papers dedicated to the analysis of National Socialism. This debate became a focal point for a renewed inquiry into the make-up of society's totality. It also raised the question of how much philosophy was needed and had to be 'added' to political economy to account for the socio-economic changes that National Socialism stood for – the responses to this latter question constitute the other important concern of this issue of *History of the Human Sciences*.

Tentatively speaking, Horkheimer, Pollock and Adorno, who became part of the institute's inner circle only in 1938, seem to have prepared the path for a predominantly philosophical analysis of society, whereas Grossmann, like Pollock a core member of the institute since its inauguration in 1924, seems to have remained faithful to a traditional Marxist understanding of society. Sohn-Rethel and, lastly, Kirchheimer and Neumann, who both joined the institute in the late 1930s, seem to have ended up in an intermediate position. On the one hand, they remained true to a traditional Marxist analysis, on the other – perhaps an unavoidable result of their empirical bent – they could not but realize

that the contradiction between productive forces and relations had long ceased to produce a revolutionary subject.⁴

Yet caution is necessary here. Any such grouping can be conveniently made only retroactively and should not be taken for an irreconcilable divide. First, what had become precarious in the late 1930s was not the common ground; neither the necessity of a concept of totality, nor the assumption that such totality can be grasped from the point of view of society's mode of reproduction, was under scrutiny. What had become precarious in view of National Socialism was the idea that the contradiction between relations and forces of production still provided a useful anchor point for an understanding of totality and that emancipatory potential resided in class struggle. Second, the fact that the various disciplinary and theoretical approaches to what many saw as a qualitatively new relationship between the political and the economic were juxtaposed in the institute's journal indicates that positions were in flux. The debate itself had a heuristic value and the major works resulting from it should be read less as adopting a position than as being informed by its entirety.⁵

2 Revolution or the leap out? Philosophy despite political economy

Max Horkheimer's 1931 inaugural speech defended philosophy and advocated for Fichte, Kant and Hegel. Today, it is somewhat difficult to comprehend why philosophy was in need of defense. But such pleadings were not unprecedented. Karl Korsch, with *Marxismus und Philosophie*, and Georg Lukács, famously with *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, had already fought a similar battle in 1923 (and both were severely reprimanded by the party orthodoxy). It was dogma on the political left that Marx's political economy – as the outcome of idealism, the peak of bourgeois philosophy – had sublated philosophy as such. Horkheimer still struggled with this assumption and its implication in 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (2002a[1937]), as did Herbert Marcuse (who joined the institute in 1932) in his programmatic essay 'Philosophy and Critical Theory':

At the time of its origin, in the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century, philosophy was the most advanced form of consciousness ... Once critical theory had recognized the responsibility of economic conditions for the totality of the established world ... philosophy became superfluous ... problems bearing on the potentialities of man and of reason could now be approached from the standpoint of economics. (Marcuse, 2009[1937]: 99)

But because philosophy was preserved *within* political economy, Marcuse continued, each of its concepts was more than just an economic concept.⁶ What Marx's materialism had inherited from idealist philosophy was an orientation towards freedom and the insight that freedom consisted in reconciliation between the individual and the universal, that it was contingent on the rule of reason over being. With Marxism then, Marcuse concluded this line of reasoning:

... a social situation has come about in which the realization of reason no longer needs to be restricted to pure thought and will. If reason means shaping life according to man's free decision ... then the demand for reason henceforth means the creation of a social

organization in which individuals can collectively regulate their lives in accordance with their needs. With the realization of reason in such a society, philosophy would disappear. (2009[1937]: 104)

The subjunctive ‘would’ deserves attention here; reason did not rule and philosophy was not sublated (or as Marx said ‘realized’).⁷ Hence philosophy haunted Marx’s political economy with its unfulfilled promises (perhaps the reversal of that other haunting: the haunting by the specter of communism). Philosophy, Marcuse and Horkheimer held, prevented not only a fall-back into empiricism, but also Marxism’s blind trust in the proper functioning of the economic antagonisms.

Critical theory is, last but not least, critical of itself . . . The philosophical element in the theory is a form of protest against the new ‘Economism’, which would isolate the economic struggle and separate the economic from the political sphere. (2009[1937]: 115)

In Sohn-Rethel’s words, philosophy had to maintain the connection between economic enquiry and freedom, yet do so from within Marxism.

A comparison with Korsch’s and Lukács’ attempts (both in 1923) to make a case for philosophy *and* Marxism might be instructive here. Korsch also agreed with the assumption that Marxism makes philosophy superfluous and ultimately sublates it.⁸ He envisioned this not in the form of a ‘single intellectual deed of Marx and Engels’, but ‘as a very long and arduous revolutionary process’ (Korsch, 1970[1923]: 47). Marx’s *Capital*, Korsch claimed accordingly, was not Marxism in the state of maturity; rather it represented a response to the weakening of revolutionary movements and was an attempt to win minds via the path (or detour) of science. With the reawakening of revolutionary forces in the 20th century, it would become necessary, Korsch maintained, to resume the fight against philosophy, which implied a return to Marx’s early, philosophical writings. At stake was not so much the preservation of idealism within Marxism or to sustain its haunting, but a reinvigoration of Marxism. For this to become possible, Marxism itself had again to become (the only true) philosophy. In a very similar vein, Lukács sought to lead Marxism back to a direct confrontation with its neglected origin – idealism – in order to induce a revolutionary turn. The proletariat then would become ‘the identical subject-object, the subject of action’ (Lukács, 1971[1923]: 149).⁹ Their language was carried by actionism. In 1923 Weimar, all signs pointed to an imminent dissolution of the existing order – parliamentary (representational) democracy – which inhibited real life (immediacy) from ‘taking place’. Far and wide, philosophy declared itself performative, hoping to help bring about rupture. Such experience was temporally complex: the future seemed to have already arrived unannounced and had not yet been owned by the people. Crisis, as Rüdiger Graf has shown in detailed analysis, was associated with hope across all political divides: the hope that crisis would bring societal life to the point of decision. Most intellectuals, Graf concluded, ‘considered “the horrible, low state of the present” not as the end, but believed that the current “Krisis” was a state of “extremely severe, confused fermentation”, heading toward a near, light, and better future’ (Graf, 2010: 602).

Many examples of the phenomenon alluded to by Graf can be identified here. Carl Schmitt advocated for the exception, because with it ‘the power of real life breaks through

the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition' (Schmitt, 1985[1922]: 15). Walter Benjamin envisioned 'the breaking of the cycle ... of the dialectical rising and falling in the ... forms of violence' (Benjamin, 1996[1921]: 300). Siegfried Kracauer recognized the individual in the mass ornament still 'behind the barrier of ... abstractions', yet he hoped the individual would finally 'transgress the self-imposed boundaries' (Kracauer, 1995[1927]: 82) and Martin Heidegger, the most famous theorist of alienation alongside Lukács, conceptualized an authentic being that already dwelled in the inauthentic and would finally overcome the '*they* ... constituted by the way things have been publicly interpreted, which expresses itself in idle talk' (Heidegger, 2001[1927]: 296). Such expectations were continuously fueled by political unrest and economic turmoil. If Horkheimer's 1931 defense of philosophy still cautiously evoked the hope of revolution, and thus was still aligned to Korsch's and Lukács' project,¹⁰ this could no longer have been the case in 1937 with 'Philosophy and Critical Theory' (see next section). But philosophy had not come to assume the exclusive function of a memorial for lost opportunities and pending promises. It also, at least for Horkheimer and Adorno, needed to investigate the state of stasis itself and to illuminate society's immanence. From within the totality defined by political economy, philosophy took over the relay, so to speak, once it became clear that societal antagonism would not bring about liberation. Philosophy now had to speak in place of political economy. The limits of the existing order (totality) could currently be circumscribed only negatively. In doing so, philosophy prepared society not for revolution, the next stage of societal development, but for ultimate rupture. Following Benjamin's theses in 'On the Concept of History' – 'insights which we must view as theoretical axioms' (Horkheimer to Adorno in 1941; cit. in Wiggershaus, 1994[1986]: 311) – Horkheimer stated in 'The Authoritarian State' that 'dialectic is not identical with development ... is not a further acceleration of progress, but a qualitative leap out of the dimension of progress' (Horkheimer, 1985[1942]: 107).¹¹

3 Rethinking the relationship between the political and the economic

When Marcuse spoke out against the separation of 'the economic from the political sphere' in 1937, to which challenges exactly was he responding? First, the 'economic battle' in the traditional Marxist sense was one of class struggle, it involved the idea of a necessary (lawful) final crisis of capitalism once the forces of production were irretrievably in conflict with the relations of production, which seemed to have been the case world-wide in the early 1930s. Unemployment peaked, sales and consumption stalled. The progressive concentration of capital in the form of monopolies rendered the free market ineffective. Thus objectively, according to the common reading of Marx's political economy, the conditions for liberation had been met. Yet not only had this opportunity been missed, worse, with the rise of National Socialism the opposite course had been taken – toward total domination. It became evident that the objectively existing economic possibility of a liberated society did not automatically translate into revolutionary consciousness; what had been underestimated in all revolutionary scenarios, it seemed, was the subject-forming force of society or the 'horizontal' forces – political and other – of societal integration.

Second, the new political order that had emerged from the crisis of economic liberalism, National Socialism, seemed to employ means that were not dissimilar to those the

Frankfurt School theorists had imagined as remedies; above all, the emphasis on centralized economic planning. National Socialism (and not least the situation in the Soviet Union) gave a painful demonstration of the fact that what appeared to be the end of a free market economy, of classes and of the private disposition over property was entirely compatible with brutal domination. Under National Socialism, politics (that is: the state) interfered massively with the free play of economic forces.

If the first concern already drew into question the idea of the emancipatory potential of the contradiction between forces and relations of production, the second had implications that reached even further: that antagonism itself might be not a solution, but part of the problem. Forces of production developed on a large industrial scale might bear affinity with all-encompassing (authoritarian) administration. The engagement of Critical Theory with contemporary economic thought – as well as with psychology and sociology – should then be interpreted in the context of these challenges.

Martin Jay acknowledges the breadth of economic discussions within the Frankfurt School, but he warns: ‘It would be . . . an error to argue that these economic analyses were really integrated into the heart of Critical Theory. Horkheimer and Adorno . . . were never serious students of economics, Marxist or otherwise’ (Jay, 1973: 152). Yet the institute practised a form of division of labor that is different from today’s idea of interdisciplinary research. The borders of the individual disciplines were respected. The endeavor was instead multi-disciplinary. Hence it might be adequate to say that the specific disciplines had continuously to *inform* the debates within the institute, and they provided an empirical resource for the theoretically more encompassing articles that became the hallmark of Critical Theory, a resource from which various and often opposite conclusions could be drawn.

The following list comprises all articles from the body of the institute’s journal that were dedicated exclusively to political economy and contemporary economic theory and practice:¹²

- 1932: Henryk Grossmann, ‘Die Wert-Preis Transformation bei Marx und das Krisenproblem’; [The Value Price Transformation in Marx and the Problem of Crisis]; Friedrich Pollock ‘Die gegenwärtige Lage des Kapitalismus und die Aussichten auf eine planwirtschaftliche Neuordnung’ [The Current State of Capitalism and Perspectives on a Planned Economy]
- 1933: Kurt Baumann, ‘Autarkie und Planwirtschaft’ [Autarky and Planned Economy]; Friedrich Pollock, ‘Bemerkungen zur Wirtschaftskrise’ [Comments on the Economic Crisis]; Gerhard Rusche, ‘Arbeitsmarkt und Strafvollzug’ [Labour Market and Penal System]
- 1934: Kurt Mandelbaum & Gerhard Meyer, ‘Zur Theorie der Planwirtschaft’ [On the Theory of Planned Economy]
- 1935: Henryk Grossmann, ‘Die gesellschaftlichen Grundlagen der mechanistischen Philosophie und die Manufaktur’ [The Societal Bases of Mechanistic Philosophy and Manufacturing]; Kurt Mandelbaum, ‘Neue Literatur zur Planwirtschaft’ [New Literature on a Planned Economy], Gerhard Meyer, ‘Krisenpolitik und Planwirtschaft’ [Politics of Crisis and Planned Economy]; K.A. Wittvogel, ‘Foundation and Stages of Chinese Economic History’
- 1936: Erich Baumann, ‘Keynes’ Revision der liberalistischen Nationalökonomie’ [Keynes’s Revision of Liberal National Economics]; Kurt Mandelbaum, ‘Neuere

- Literatur zur technologischen Arbeitslosigkeit' [New Literature on Technological Unemployment]; Felix Weil, 'Neuere Literatur zum New Deal' [New Literature on the New Deal]
- 1937: Paul Sehring, 'Zu Marshalls Neuklassischer Ökonomie' [On Marshall's New-Classical Economy]; Raymond Aaron, 'La Sociologie de Pareto' [The Sociology of Pareto]
 - 1938: Felix Weil, 'Neue Literatur zur deutschen Wehrwirtschaft' [New Literature on the German War-Economy]; K.A. Wittvogel, 'Bericht über eine größere Untersuchung der sozialökonomischen Struktur China' [Report on a Major Study on China's Socio-economic Structure]
 - 1941: Arkadij Gurland, 'Technological Trends and Economic Structure under National Socialism'; Friedrich Pollock, 'State Capitalism'; Friedrich Pollock, 'Is National Socialism a New Order?'

These essays display a double interest: on the one hand, a focus on the particularity of the socio-economic make-up of National Socialism (Weil, Pollock, Gurland, Meyer) and, on the other, a more broadly oriented investigation of concepts and practices of economic planning, including discussions of Roosevelt's New Deal and Keynes' economic theory (Kurt and Erich Baumann, Mandelbaum, Weil, Sehring). Furthermore, they are accompanied by a presentation of Wittvogel's research on China's socio-economic structure. It is not difficult to see that such thematic orientations supported a new valorization of the political. The centrality assumed by questions of planning implies that politics was seen as potentially more than just a reflection of a foundational economic structure. The simultaneous discussions of contemporary economic policies and theories from across the political spectrum provided an incentive for a shift of attention away from classical Marxist political economy to questions of government and authoritarianism, a category that eventually comprised – as problematic as this might be – National Socialism, the Soviet Union and the New Deal as variants of state interventionism. Wittvogel's empirical data on China seemed to have thereby functioned as a catalyst.¹³ But the exploration of society's economic base structure and the interest in its mode of reproduction were not abandoned, contrary to theories of totalitarianism, which likewise associated Nazism, communism and often the New Deal with one another. Horkheimer, for example, made the existence of large centralized industrial production the most important commonality between different forms of state interventionism; it was this base to which the state responded. And economic distinctions were reintroduced within the renewed frame of inquiry; that is, after the re-evaluation of the political.¹⁴ Such distinctions and their *relative* weight then constituted the thrust of the debates within the institute in the late 1930s.¹⁵ Thus it might well be that instead of having betrayed Marxism by abandoning economic analysis, Critical Theory in fact hit a nerve by touching upon a qualitatively new paradigm of governing the economic; a form that is perhaps still with us under the title of 'neo-liberalism'.¹⁶

4 This issue's articles

Manfred Gangl and Rick Kuhn revisit the institute's debate on politics and the economy usually subsumed under the name 'state-capitalism debate'. Their contributions lay bare the different positions on political economy within Critical Theory, and they investigate

the contentious relationship between economic analysis and philosophical enquiry, the latter of which, Kuhn holds, led to the progressive marginalization of one of the institute's founding members: Henryk Grossmann. Werner Bonefeld discusses Adorno's reassessment of Marx's political economy and of the categories of class struggle and productive forces. He argues that Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* does not break with economic analysis; on the contrary, although technically philosophy, it practises an economic analysis under the conditions of a qualitatively new relationship between politics and economy. Frank Engster investigates comparatively how Lukács, Sohn-Rethel and Adorno theorized the subject-forming force of capitalist economy. These theorists, Engster claims, all prioritize the category of exchange over the category of labor and thus break with traditional Marxism. They understand subject formation, in the wake of German idealist philosophy, as resulting from the mediation between subject and object through the commodity form. Karsten Olson's point of departure is the claim that with Otto Kirchheimer, the Frankfurt School theorists welcomed Carl Schmitt's political philosophy into their circle. Olson argues – drawing on Alfons Söllner's work – that this is far from being the case and discusses in detail the status of economic analysis in the work of Schmitt and Kirchheimer. Finally, Kiarina Kordela deals in depth with Alfred Sohn-Rethel's attempts to combine Marxian analysis with Kant's transcendentalism for the sake of a materialist epistemology. Kordela re-evaluates Sohn-Rethel's contribution by placing him within a much larger philosophical debate between monism and dualism, and thus illustrates the scope of Critical Theory's engagement with philosophy.

II What are Critical Theories of the Economic? Towards a Heuristic-Normative Scheme Based on Max Horkheimer (Bastian Ronge)

I How to think philosophically about (Political) Economy?

How to think philosophically about (political) economy? Academic philosophy in general does not seem to be overly interested in (political) economy.¹⁷ Two branches nevertheless concern themselves with economic questions: business ethics and, more recently, philosophy of economics. Business ethics began as a variant of applied ethics in the 1970s and has meanwhile established itself as a proper subdiscipline within academic philosophy, while philosophy of economics is still in the process of institutionalization. It has a broader scope than business ethics, which focuses exclusively on normative questions and provides ethical guidelines. 'Philosophers of economics' are 'philosophers whose work focuses on the theoretical, methodological and ethical foundations of economics' (Reiss, 2013: 6). Despite this difference, philosophy of economics and business ethics share the same foundation. Both accept the authority of the economic sciences when it comes to understanding economic reality. They do not call this competence into question and respond to theoretical, methodological and normative problems only within the frame defined by the economic sciences. Business ethics and philosophy of economics treat philosophical reflection as the handmaid of economics, to rephrase the famous topos used by medieval philosophy to describe the relationship between philosophy and theology.

This way of thinking about the relationship between philosophy and (political) economy has very little to do with the conception of early Critical Theory. When Max

Horkheimer became the director of the Institute for Social Research (IfS) in 1931, he instantly posed the pressing question of how to think philosophically about the economy. There has probably never been any period in the history of (modern) philosophy where this relationship was more under scrutiny than in these early years. While the debate within the Frankfurt School did not amount to anything that could be called a definite result (see part I), the various discussions themselves are nevertheless of great pertinence to present-day discussion about what could and should be the scope of economic philosophy (see Enkelmann and Priddat, 2014). In what follows, I will contribute to this debate by focusing on Max Horkheimer and the statements about philosophy and (political) economy found in his inaugural speech ‘The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research’ (1993[1931]) and in his essay on ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ (2002a[1937]) including the ‘Postscript’ (1986[1937]). These documents are probably the most programmatic for early Critical Theory and since Horkheimer took his responsibility as the director of the Institute for Social Research seriously (just like his forerunner Carl Grünberg), his statements have a special status: they represent the attempt of the director of the institute to define the guidelines for how to think critically about (political) economy within the framework of Critical Theory. In other words, Horkheimer’s statements can be used as a plausible source for answering the difficult question of what a Critical Theory of the economic should look like.¹⁸ This is exactly what I attempt to do in the following. It is important to note that the main interest is not historical; that is, I am not interested in reconstructing Horkheimer’s statement within the broader context of Hegelian Marxism and the discussion among the members of the Institute (see part I). Rather I will ‘de-contextualize’ them in order to propose an *heuristic-normative scheme*, which allows us to understand and evaluate the different (critical) approaches to the economic that we can see today: from business ethics and philosophy of economics to the complex field of post-Marxist theories.

2 Extrapolating Horkheimer: Towards a heuristic-normative scheme

In his inaugural speech and in his essays mentioned above Horkheimer determines 5 key features for a Critical Theory of the economic. The first is the renunciation of any claim to objectivity with regard to the economic realm. This criterion directly results from one of the essential features of Critical Theory, namely its rupture with the epistemological set-up of traditional theory. Traditional theory holds tight to the Cartesian idea that the subject and the object of knowledge are epistemologically separate. According to Horkheimer, Critical Theory calls this radically into question; it sees the subject and the object as always intertwined:

The facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. (Horkheimer, 2002a[1937]: 200)

The Critical Theorist has to acknowledge the fact that it is impossible for one to gain objective access to the object of knowledge (Horkheimer, 2002a[1937]: 222). This also

holds true for theoretical engagement with the economic. Once Critical Theory presupposes that any economic discourse is necessarily subjective and partial, politics enters the picture. It is exactly this inclusion that prevents Critical Theory from itself becoming no more than an economic science:

[C]ritical theory has never been reducible to specialized economic science. The dependence of politics on the economy has been its object, not its program. (Horkheimer, 1986[1937]: 251)

A second criterion for critical thinking about the economic results from the overall goal of Critical Theory: the ‘establishment of justice among men’ (Horkheimer, 2002a[1937]: 243). Critical Theorists are motivated by the ‘hope of radically improving human existence’ (ibid.: 233). This means that with regard to their critical engagement with the economic, they are on the lookout for alternative economic structures that are no longer capitalist. Whereas Horkheimer has no reservations about using knowledge from the traditional sciences, as long as it can contribute to the project of a ‘rationally organized future society’ (ibid.) – he sees no value in the knowledge of the economic sciences. Their analyses, he maintains, ‘are related to nothing and are calculated to hide reality at every point’ (Horkheimer, 1986[1937]: 251). For this reason, Horkheimer observes that:

The curves of the mathematical political economics of our day are no more able to maintain a link with essentials than are positivist or existential philosophy. Concepts in these disciplines have lost any relation to the fundamental situations of the age. (1986[1937]: 246)

Economic sciences produce incorrect and misleading representations of the economic. Critical Theory has, therefore, the task of criticizing and deconstructing mainstream economists’ key concepts, preferably in the mode of immanent critique; that is, by presenting them as subject to dialectical reversal:

Unlike modern specialized science . . . the critical theory of society has continued to be a philosophical discipline even when it engages in a critique of the economy. For its content is the transformation of the concepts which dominate the economy into their opposites: fair exchange into a deepening of social injustice, a free economy into monopolistic control, productive work into rigid relationships which hinder production, the maintenance of society’s life into the pauperization of the peoples. (Horkheimer, 1986[1937]: 247)

This (dialectical) critique can be ascribed as the third key feature of Critical Theories of the economic. However, Critical Theorists cannot content themselves with critique alone. They have to carry out their own economic analysis, inspired by the ongoing historical transformations of the socio-economic world:

The critique of economism . . . consists not in turning away from economic analysis but in engaging in it more fully and along the lines indicated by history. (Horkheimer, 1986[1937]: 250)

These economic analyses should be run, according to Horkheimer, in an interdisciplinary manner, bringing together philosophers, economists, sociologists, psychologists and so on (cf. part I). Philosophy must take the lead within this cooperation, since it is the only discipline that guarantees that scientific investigations do not end up in mere positivistic accounts, but contribute to one of the most important goals of Critical Theory: namely to gain understanding and experience of the socio-economic present.

The 5th requirement concerns the premise of the economic analyses in question. In his inaugural speech, Horkheimer emphasizes that Critical Theory must hold on to the distinction between the economical and the non-economical (e.g. the social, the cultural, the religious) without falling into the trap of ‘badly understood Marx’, ‘badly understood Hegel’, or ‘bad Spinozism’ (Horkheimer, 1993[1931]: 12). Horkheimer states:

It can thus be asserted that economy and Spirit are different expressions of one and the same essence; this would be bad Spinozism. Or, alternatively, one maintains that ideas or ‘spiritual’ contents break into history and determine the action of human beings . . . This would be an abstractly and thus badly understood Hegel. Or one believes, contrariwise, that the economy as material being is the only true reality; the psyche of human beings, personality as well as law, art, and philosophy, are to be completely derived from the economy, or mere reflections of the economy. This would be an abstractly and thus badly understood Marx. Such notions naively presuppose an uncritical, obsolete, and highly problematic divorce between Spirit and reality which fails to synthesize them dialectically. (Horkheimer, 1993[1931]: 12)

Critical Theories of the economic have to maintain that the economic and the non-economic are separate, but at the same time dialectally intertwined.

To sum up: in Horkheimer’s most programmatic texts, one can find 5 claims about the way in which Critical Theory should deal with the economic world. Critical Theorists should take a (1) non-objective, but partial approach to the economic, that (2) aims at an alternative, non-capitalistic economic order by (3) criticizing (mainstream) economic sciences and (4) providing their own economic analysis, guided by philosophy, while (5) holding on to the dialectical relationship between the economic and the non-economic. These 5 claims can be used to design a heuristic-normative scheme that allows us to understand and evaluate various present-day theoretical engagements with the economic.

3 Using Horkheimer: Evaluating current (critical) approaches to the economic

Using the heuristic-normative scheme extrapolated from Horkheimer, one can easily see why business ethics as well as philosophy of economics cannot become critical in the sense of Critical Theory. These disciplines accept the discourse of economic ‘hard’ sciences as authoritative. Hence, they neither see their theoretical engagement as partial nor do they attempt to criticize the key concepts of economic sciences or run their own economic analyses. Questioning the authority of mainstream economic sciences is, however, the precondition for establishing Critical Theories of the

economic. It seems that this condition is satisfied by those theoretical projects broadly accepted as (post-)Marxist. But to what extent do they satisfy the other criteria extrapolated from Horkheimer's early text?

Due to the wide range of feminist, poststructuralist, deconstructive, discourse-theoretical and neo-Marxist theories that can be subsumed under post-Marxism, it would go far beyond the scope of this introduction to answer the question posed above. In the following, I limit myself to demonstrating the 'productivity' of the designed heuristic-normative scheme with regard to just one example, namely the work of J. K. Gibson-Graham,¹⁹ who provides an influential feminist and poststructuralist critique of political economy (see Gibson-Graham, 2006a[1996], 2006b). He introduces the term 'capitalo-centric' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a[1996]: 6) in order to emphasize that our thinking about economy is highly determined by the category of capitalism. Fighting against the injustice of capitalism and for alternative economic structures demands opposing this hegemonic 'capitalocentric discourse' (Gibson-Graham, 2006b: 55) and the construction of a 'new language of economic diversity' (ibid.: 56) that allows the subjects of alternative economic practices to understand these as viable, non-defective alternatives. This sketch of Gibson-Graham's approach already shows that most of the requirements for Critical Theories of the economic are satisfied: their theoretical work is partial, aims at a better economic order, is based on the deconstruction of mainstream economists' key concepts and encompasses original economic analyses. However, the heuristic-normative scheme raises the crucial question of whether Gibson-Graham manages to avoid the trap of so-called 'bad Spinozism'. Since they consider the difference between the economic and the non-economic as the expression of one and the same 'substance', namely the practice of political and ethical articulation, they might fall short of the last, but very essential, feature of Critical Theories of the economic. However, instead of working through the vast field of post-Marxian theories in order to confirm this assumption, I will now turn to present-day Critical Theory and evaluate its critical engagement with economy.

The philosophical work of Axel Honneth is here of peculiar interest, not only because he is frequently considered to be the most important representative of contemporary Critical Theory, but because the economic implications of his philosophy of recognition (Honneth, 1996[1992]) were the subject of intense debate (see in particular Fraser and Honneth, 2004). Nancy Fraser, among others, criticized Honneth's theory of recognition for being unable to offer an adequate understanding of economic reality. Since Honneth looks at economic matters through the lens of recognition, the argument goes, he is unable to acknowledge the economic sphere in its own right. Hence, he can neither identify the real economic causes behind economic injustice nor present effective solutions (Zurn, 2005). Emmanuel Renault points out, however, that this criticism partly misses the point, since Honneth's overall goal is not to explain economic injustice, but to provide a theoretical framework for understanding the subjective experience of economic injustice (Renault, 2004). And Jean-Philippe Deranty calls attention to the fact that Honneth seems to be more critical towards 'positivist economic approaches' (Deranty, 2009: 297 [trans. B. R.]) than his opponents, whose criticism is based on the assumption that there are 'real' economic reasons that can be analysed by the economic sciences. In fact, Honneth seems to be aware that any theoretical description of economic affairs has an effect on economic reality itself. Thus he holds that the struggle over

economic injustices can benefit from translating the experience of economic justice into a vocabulary that differs from the language of the economic sciences proper, such as the vocabulary of recognition. One could also read Honneth's attempt to reconceptualize the market as an institution of social freedom in his book *Freedom's Right* (Honneth, 2014[2011]: ch. 3.2) as well as his plea for a more experimental approach towards the economic in his latest book on the *Idea of Socialism* in this context (Honneth, 2015: ch. 3). In other words, Honneth's engagement with economic issues is far more critical, according to the criteria extrapolated from Horkheimer, than his critics realize. Indeed one has to admit that Honneth (also) tends to fall short of the 5th criterion, since his discourse on the economic does not retain the difference between the economic and the non-economic. In this respect, Honneth's critics are right: his theory of recognition is not suited to acknowledging the exceptional position of the economic. They are wrong, however, if they think that conceptualizing the economic and the non-economic as different 'spheres' would solve the problem. This way of thinking about the relationship in question might enable one to draw a distinction between the economic and the non-economic (for example, with regard to their characteristic modes of action), but it does not help to describe their dialectical entanglement. On the contrary, the language of spheres leads mostly to a merely antagonistic description of their relationship (keyword: colonization of the lifeworld). More promising in this respect seems to be the concept of forms of life [*Lebensformen*] recently reformulated by Rahel Jaeggi (Jaeggi, 2013). According to Jaeggi, forms of life can be understood 'as an inert set, ensemble or bundle of social practices', whereby social practices also encompass economic practices in the strict sense, namely as practices that are 'concerned with the satisfaction of the reproductive needs of society' (Jaeggi, 2016, forthcoming). Or to be more precise, practices 'addressing economic concerns' are always already 'connected or even entangled with other, non-economic practices and interpretations' (ibid.). Within this conceptual framework, the difference between the economic and the non-economic can be sustained without falling into the language of different spheres. It is an open question, however, whether Jaeggi is able to identify the entanglement between economic and non-economic practices as dialectical. If so, the concept of forms of life – already employed by Horkheimer in order to replace the orthodox Marxian model of base and superstructure (Horkheimer, 2002b[1936]: 59–62) – appears to be a sound conceptual foundation for a Critical Theory of the economic in the tradition of the Frankfurt School.

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Notes

The German articles listed in section I:3 are not cited in the article and so do not appear in the References.

1. The disciplines most relevant to the Frankfurt School's program of a 'multi-disciplinary' materialism were sociology, economics, political science, literature/art, psychology, philosophy and history.
2. Sohn-Rethel was related to the Frankfurt School through his acquaintance with Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. He never achieved joining the close-knit circles of the Frankfurt School theorists, although Adorno – in 1936 still very enthusiastic about Sohn-Rethel's materialist epistemology – made various attempts to persuade Horkheimer to include Sohn-Rethel (who lived without sufficient means in England) and to publish his work in the institute's journal. Sohn-Rethel nevertheless had an important influence. First, his deduction of Kant's transcendental philosophy from the economic practice of exchange is echoed in Adorno's thinking, in particular in *Negative Dialectics*. Second, Sohn-Rethel's theory of National Socialism seemed to have been a reference point in the institute's discussion of fascism. In, for example, 'Die Juden und Europa' [The Jews and Europe] (1989[1939]: 119), Horkheimer critiques the claim that National Socialism relies on support from the bankrupt coal and steel industries – a thesis that is at the core of Sohn-Rethel's explanation of National Socialism. Adorno had asked Sohn-Rethel in 1938 to 'send as fast as possible the promised summary of your theory of loss-making capitalism to Dr. F. Pollock' (Adorno and Sohn-Rethel, 1991: 85–6 [trans. M. R.]); however, it remains unclear whether he did.
3. See Wiggershaus (1994[1986]: 21 and ch. 4) and more recently Wheatland (2009: 81–94). Horkheimer (1993[1931]: 11) embraced Grünberg's phrase of a 'dictatorship of directors' and proclaimed in his inaugural lecture: 'It will thus be possible for me . . . to erect a dictatorship of planned work.'
4. Martin Jay (1973: 166) suggests a different grouping: he divides strictly between Neumann, Gurland and Kirchheimer, on the one hand, and Horkheimer and Pollock, on the other.
5. The 1941 issue of *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences* was originally designed to discuss state capitalism and was meant to be designated accordingly. It ended up without a title. National Socialism was discussed from various perspectives. Friedrich Pollock, for example, contributed two short articles defending the state capitalism thesis and the idea of a new primacy of politics over economics, whereas Arkadij Gurland's long, empirically rich economic study argued against that claim and made the opposite case.
6. The article's first section, written by Horkheimer as a post-scriptum to 'Traditional and Critical Theory', made the same argument: 'In radically analyzing present social conditions it [the new philosophy (M. R.)] became a critique of economy' (Horkheimer, 1986[1937]: 246), but ultimately (and respectfully) modified it: 'Unlike modern specialized science, however, critical theory of society has continued to be a philosophical discipline even when it engages in a critique of economy' (ibid.: 247).
7. 'In a word: you cannot transcend [*aufheben*] philosophy without realizing it' (Marx, 1992[1843]: 250).
8. 'Any thorough elucidation of the relationship between *Marxism and philosophy* must start from the unambiguous statements of Marx and Engels themselves that a necessary result of their new dialectical-materialist standpoint was the supersession [*Aufhebung*], not only of bourgeois idealist philosophy, but *simultaneously* of all philosophy *as such*' (Korsch, 1970[1923]: 45).
9. Lukács makes a reference here to Fichte, which the translation omits; the German word is *Tathandlung*.

10. Horkheimer had become suspicious of the 'revolutionary subject' at the latest since Erich Fromm joined the institute in 1930. Fromm was brought in to conduct a psychoanalytic study on the connection between workers' political orientation and personal values or psychological disposition; in the 1930s in France, Switzerland and the Netherlands similar studies that focused on family structure and the relation to authority were executed. These studies were unable to confirm that the economic destruction of or threat to the petty-bourgeois family had led to new forms of solidarity. Instead, the subjects investigated seemed to long for new authorities such as parties and mass organizations. The lack of trust in the course of history envisioned by orthodox Marxism is also evidenced by the fact that the institute started to plan an escape route as early as 1930: Horkheimer opened a branch office in Switzerland and started to transfer funds to the Netherlands (see Jay, 1973: 37; Wiggershaus, 1994[1986]: 127–8).
11. The thematic thread of this essay is a critique of Friedrich Engel's claim that increasing state interventionism and finally state capitalism would be nothing but a transit station to socialism.
12. The journal also reserved an important place for economics in the review section alongside philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, social movements and social policy. Each edition offered between 50 and 60 short reviews (1 to 8 pages long) on new publications covering economic theory from across the political spectrum.
13. Horkheimer declared in 1938: 'China has for many centuries had a bureaucratic hierarchy which, in view of the general development of Europe and above all Germany and Russia, is constantly increasing in theoretical importance. It appears that the simple historical division into ancient, slave economy, feudalism and capitalism . . . must be fundamentally elaborated on' (cit. in Wiggershaus, 1994[1986]: 257–8).
14. Moishe Postone joins the chorus of those who hold that the Frankfurt School theorists accorded a primacy to politics and culture much to the detriment of economic analysis. They were driven to this position, he claims, because they ultimately had remained faithful to the orthodox assumption that society's main antagonism – whose effectiveness they saw finally dwindling under authoritarian rule – was one between forces and relations of production. Thus they missed seeing the productive forces themselves as complicit in the production of submission; they conceived of them as mere tools untainted by their capitalist origin – tools that could be put to a better use in a liberated society (Postone, 1993: 80–3). Although it is undeniable that this was one of the positions held within *Critical Theory*, it should not be overgeneralized as the school's position. In particular, Horkheimer's critique of big industries and his subsequent reflection on decentralization (Horkheimer, 1985: 56) in 'The Authoritarian State' suggests an awareness of the relation between authoritarianism and productive forces. Sohn-Rethel's initial enthusiasm for Mao's cultural revolution was driven by the same concerns.
15. Horkheimer's position changed on these questions; which once again illustrates that the debate remained in swing. Whereas in 'The Jews and Europe' he stated with a view to fascism: 'The aspiration for profit today ends in what it always was: striving for social power . . . Social dominance, which could not be maintained by economic means, because private property has outlived itself, is continued by directly political means' (1989[1939]: 82), he declared in 'The Authoritarian State' in 1940 (published in 1942): 'Integral statism or state socialism is the most consistent form of the authoritarian state, which has freed itself from any dependence on private capital . . . The fascist countries create a mixed form. Though here too surplus value is brought under state control and distributed, it flows under the old name of

- profits in great amounts to the industrial magnates and landowners' (Horkheimer, 1985[1942]: 101–2).
16. 'Should I have to pronounce the secret of contemporary society, of the monopolist and the totalitarian, in one sentence', Adorno wrote, 'I'd say that today the apparatus for a reproduction of life immediately coincides with that of its domination' (cit. in Braunstein, 2011: 196), a statement that seems reminiscent of Michel Foucault's analysis of the concept of human capital in *Birth of Biopolitics* (ch. 9).
 17. Using the notion of '(political) economy' has the advantage of simultaneously allowing reference to the economic science (political economy) as well as to its subject matter (economy).
 18. As is quite commonly practised, I write 'Critical Theory' with a capital 'C' when referring to the Frankfurt School in the narrow sense, while I use 'critical' to refer to all kinds of critical approaches such as feminist, postcolonial, discourse-theoretical and deconstructive theories.
 19. Gibson Graham is the pen name of the political economists and economic geographers Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham.

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