

A DEFENCE OF DIALECTICS
CRITICAL THEORY AND EPISTEMOLOGY:
THE POLITICS OF MODERN THOUGHT AND
***SCIENCE*, BY ANASTASIA MARINOPOULOU**

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Critical Theory has become a *paspartout* label. Approaches, which are indebted to the critical theory tradition, spread through almost all disciplinary sub-fields of the social sciences. What can really count as a truly critical project now varies according to context. Furthermore, an ongoing debate in social philosophy has turned its attention to the conceptual notion of critique and tries to clarify the different ramifications of the critical theory project.¹ Anastasia Marinopoulou's book on 'Critical Theory and Epistemology: The Politics of Modern Thought and Science' intervenes upon this cacophony of approaches. The book is published in the 21st century critical theory book series, which attempts to inspire a creative recovery of early critical theory resources for contemporary challenges.²

In her book, Marinopoulou insists on a dialectical type of scientific knowledge-formation as the core of critical theory. This project essentially consists of three levels: (i) 'a theory of normative rationality', (ii) a commitment to 'rational practice' and (iii) 'dialectics' as 'pivotal method and scope' for the social sciences (*ibidem*, 4). In the course of her argument, she engages with a variety of epistemological approaches of the 20th century, ranging from Heidegger and Husserl to Foucault, Luhmann and Critical Realism. At every step, she shows how the respective approaches tend to disentangle the interplay of these three tenets and she demonstrates the arising fallacies of non-dialectical epistemologies, leading ultimately to irrationalization, misconception of social practices, or anti-dialectical de-politicization.

The study aims to redirect our attention to the persisting relevance of the

¹ See e.g. Celikates 2018.

² Marinopoulou 2017.

epistemological approach which Jürgen Habermas exposed in his early writings in the 1960s and 1970s (ibidem, 12). Here, Habermas had tried to re-establish the connection between scientific research, social movements and political transformation.³ Habermas' twist started from a severe critique of scientific positivism, but it ended in an enthusiastic reappraisal of the social sciences as sites of emancipatory knowledge-production. Habermas at least identified the possibility of the social sciences engaging in a reflexive process where both 'subject' and 'object' as well as scientific research and political agency lose their role as a fixed entity and slide 'dialectically' through their inherent contradictions, reflect on societal distortions and engage in a dialogue with the quest for political change. Thereby, as Habermas argues, it seems possible to re-establish a relationship of truth and societal transformation. It is through a mutual division of labour between the social sciences (being committed to their disciplinary background) and social movements (being committed to bring about social change) that the epistemological project of critical theory can flourish. It should be possible to reconstruct those sources of knowledge which help to overcome the given distortions and contradictions in the social fabric. By drawing on the dynamic relationship between the 'analyst' and the 'analysand' in psychoanalysis, Habermas was able to reconceive the project of knowledge-formation in the social sciences without losing its political (and universalist) core.⁴ Accordingly, Marinopoulou sticks to the boundary transcending dimension of such a critical epistemology. Against the reification of objects in Heidegger's ontology, she insists on the mutual constitution of the subjective and objective dimensions in the research process. Against Foucault's and Luhmann's relativism, she plays out the assumption of a communicative rationality which crosses the various subsystems and practices of power. Finally, she unpacks the relevance of a 'political knowledge' which attempts to 'realize reason' (ibidem, 170).

These epistemological deliberations must be understood as a reaction to the disjunction of theory and practice in the critical theory tradition. Most famously, it was Georg Lukacs who was claiming a unity of theory and practice in the form of the political party. Thereby, he was attacking the division of labour between political struggle and scientific knowledge formation. According to Lukacs, only the internalization of knowledge-formation in the political organism (as opposed to the external knowledge production of the social sciences), can bring to the fore those sources of knowledge which can ultimately lead to social emancipation.⁵ Max Horkheimer's famous distinction between critical and traditional theory, which serves as an important point of reference in Marinopoulou's book, takes a certain perspective on this approach. On the one hand, Horkheimer advances a critique of the positivistic distinction between scientific truth and political change. On the other, Horkheimer insists on the autonomy of the intellectual field and argues against the subordination

³ Habermas 1975, 59 ff.

⁴ see for an aggiornamento: Celikates 2018.

⁵ Lukacs 1923, 298 ff.

of knowledge production to instrumental rationality which inherently creeps into Lukacs' model. Thus, he turns to the attitude of the critical theorist him/herself which is entangled in the scientific system and political conflict, but – at the same time – displays a 'critical behavior' vis-à-vis both potentially totalizing social logics.⁶

One can read, the epistemological project of the Habermas-Marinopoulou line against this backdrop. It is an attempt to – once again – reconcile theory and practice which have fallen apart – be it under the auspices of an anti-scientific, performative turn in the first generation of the Frankfurt school (Horkheimer) or under the auspices of anti-dialectical epistemologies (Foucault, Luhmann, Heidegger). While Habermas argued against the 'founding of new parties' in the wake of the 1968 movement and opted for a reform of the educational system (with the more promising potential of universalizing a reflexive epistemology),⁷ Marinopoulou argues for a recovery of dialectical epistemology as an important means to political transformation: 'Therefore, it bears the potential to transform the possibly closed system of science into an open process that incorporates the not yet included through the negation of identity thinking' (ibidem, 172).

Marinopoulou's book provides an intriguing aggiornamento of the critical theory project. However, it could be that the presented solution to the problem of social transformation shows an inherent flaw which Lukacs (in line with American pragmatism, Antonio Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, and Niklas Luhmann's system theory) emphasized. In order to bring about societal change, a body of knowledge must be recovered which can only emanate from a distinct *political* coupling of theory and practice and, thereby, goes to some extent beyond the interplay of social science, public sphere and social movements.

Celikates, Robin 2018: Critique as Social Practice. Critical Theory and Social Self-Understanding, Essex.

Habermas, Jürgen 1972: Theorie und Praxis. Sozialphilosophische Studien, Frankfurt am Main.

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Horkheimer, Max 2005: Traditionelle und Kritische Theorie (1937), Frankfurt am Main.

Lukacs, Georg 1923: Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein, Berlin.

Marinopoulou, Anastasia 2017: Critical Theory and Epistemology. The Politics of Modern Thought and Science, Manchester.

⁶ Horkheimer 2005, 223 ff.

⁷ Habermas 1972, 9 ff.