

The Paradox of Normalcy in the Frankfurt School

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ABSTRACT: This article proposes a solution to the 'paradox of normalcy', a problem raised by the early Frankfurt School in its questioning of basic concepts of psychoanalysis. After reviewing the different definitions of normalcy put forward by Freud, the paradoxical character of the concept of normalcy, as perceived by the various members of the Frankfurt School, will be made explicit. The solution to the paradox will take the form of a practical 'dis-solution', and will bring to the fore a fundamental principle of Critical Theory identified as the 'banning of graven images', which will be shown to operate even in the contemporary work of Habermas.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article propose une solution au 'paradoxe de la normalité' qui émergea lors des analyses psychanalytiques de l'École de Francfort de première heure. Suite à une revue des différentes définitions de la normalité avancées par Freud, le caractère paradoxal du concept de normalité, tel que perçu par divers membres de l'École de Francfort, sera explicité. La solution au paradoxe prendra la forme d'une 'dis-solution' pratique et mettra en relief un principe fondamental de la Théorie Critique identifié comme 'interdiction des idoles', laquelle opère encore — comme il sera démontré — dans l'oeuvre contemporaine de Habermas.

The Frankfurt School, simply known in its early years as *Critical Theory*, came to be known in philosophy for its integration of dialectic materialism and psychoanalysis. Although the reception of the latter in the thought of the Frankfurt School has only recently been fully acknowledged in philosophical research¹, and despite the general lack of attention towards psychoanalysis in Critical Theory due to the emphasis laid on its neo-Marxist dimension, psychoanalysis has provided many important insights that are central for the general economy of Critical Theory. For example, light has been shed on the 'psychoanalytic' dialectic that underlies Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*²; Marcuse's philosophy in and after *Eros and Civilization* has undoubtedly been shaped with regard to both form and matter by Freud's psychoanalysis; the debate between Fromm and Marcuse on the philosophy of psychoanalysis, previewed by a similar debate between Adorno and the

neo-Freudians on the role of culture and biology in psychoanalysis, is a major landmark in the history of the Frankfurt School³; for Habermas at the end of the 1960's, psychoanalysis represented the paradigm of a critical science with emancipatory interest (Habermas, 1965g, 1968b), the establishing of which remains even today the *telos* of Habermas's philosophical endeavours. These are but a few instances of the central role played by psychoanalysis in the unfolding of Critical Theory.

Not only was psychoanalysis of great consequence in the thought of the Frankfurt School, but inversely, the Frankfurt School aimed to contribute to the theory of psychoanalysis itself. This has gone largely unnoticed in psychoanalytical circles as well as in philosophical discussions. This article seeks to remedy, in a modest way, this shortcoming by exposing one of the Frankfurt School's most far-reaching debates for psychoanalysis, which will be referred to in the following as the 'paradox of normalcy'. Moreover, this exposition will allow us to gain insight into the cardinal role played by a principle of Critical Theory throughout its history. This principle is sometimes referred to as *Bilderverbot*: the banning of graven images, which alludes to the deep suspicion aroused by the ideological potential inherent in any portrayal of an ideal society however noble the intentions of its creator may be. In this sense, philosophy should not attempt to utter or conceptualize positively the ideal social state, since it would be falling ipso facto into the pitfall of ideology. The only permissible path between scepticism and dogmatism is that of negative dialectics as negation of the negative.

It is perhaps of interest to mention that a common stance regarding the paradox of normalcy was shared by all leading representatives of Critical Theory, which evidently excludes those who simply turned their attention to other fields of knowledge, such as Leo Löwenthal (literature) and Friedrich Pollock (economics). This is not a small feat, since harmony has seldom prevailed within the ranks of Critical Theory. One should only be reminded of the schism between Fromm and Horkheimer in 1939⁴. Fromm's humanistic position was deemed too irenic in comparison with the radical framework of Horkheimer and Adorno, who had produced the caustic *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the same period. One should also recollect Horkheimer's discreet but firm opposition to the fundamental thesis of Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*⁵. Marcuse seemed to have parted in this book with the principle banning graven images, recognized earlier as a prime postulate of Critical Theory. Not only did Marcuse's Eros-centred utopia seem to defy this fundamental precept of Critical Theory, but it was too speculative for the liking of his colleagues. The history of the Frankfurt School offers many other examples of such conceptual dissensions within the movement itself. Through all these heterogeneous positions, the agreement on one particular thesis should not go unnoticed.

The paradox of normalcy concerns the definition of normalcy that was formulated by Sigmund Freud. It will become clear in the following that a *petitio principii*, i.e. a circular self-contradiction, is inherent in the very definition of normalcy. We ask ourselves how psychoanalysis can be possible at all, when its goal — the sanity or normalcy of the patient — lies on fallacious foundations; for no one can deny that the ultimate goal of psychoanalysis, beyond any theoretical endeavour, is to cure the patient. This important question raised by the Frankfurt School has never been, as of yet, answered by psychoanalytical theory itself. The reason for this can be found in the aporetic character of the question itself. Even the Horkheimers and the Adornos haven't been able to formulate a coherent answer to this problem. The question has always been raised as a logical problem within the boundaries of psychoanalytic thinking. It is thus incumbent upon us to untangle the different aspects of the problem.

Freud's definitions of normalcy

Freud propounds, as F. Nietzsche and C. Bernard have done before him⁶, a thesis of normalcy or sanity which is not moulded on the traditional discrete binomial conception (to take a mathematical analogy), which only foresees the possibility of two categories: sane and insane, or normal and abnormal. Instead, he supports the thesis of a psychical organization represented by a continuous scale that encompasses all shades of sanity or insanity between a theoretical absolute sanity and a theoretical absolute insanity. In this sense, one is not sane or insane, given only two possibilities, rather more or less sane, according to the relative position on the continuum of this psychical organization.

How is it then possible, one might ask, to label any person as sane or insane, if these categories have only a relational meaning? Isn't normalcy or abnormalcy thereby always marked by some contingency? It is so in a sense. A physician, however, cannot be content with such an answer, since his/her practice relies on a solid definition of this concept. De facto, relative concepts are fixed on a continuum only with regard to a context. Thus, a two-metre-tall person can be attributed with the relative concept 'tall' only if the context of people reaching an average of, say, 1.70 m is given. Another context could call for the antithetic attribute 'short'. By the same token, psychological sanity and insanity refer to different objects in different cultural contexts. For instance, homosexuality is placed at opposite ends of the normalcy-pathology-spectrum by Ancient Greeks and by Victorian Englishmen. From his early writings, Freud recognized the "purely conventional" character of pathology (Freud, 1895d, 83). The relativity of perversion with regards to different cultures was something conspicuous to Freud. This is the reason he

admonished the medical community not to be judgmental in its appraisal of sexual perversion: "The uncertainty in regard to the boundaries of what is to be called normal sexual life, when we take different races and different epochs into account, should in itself be enough to cool the zealot's ardour" (Freud, 1905e, 50; 124). At the turn of the century, when Freud wrote these lines, it wasn't exceptional for physicians to show their abhorrence against the deviant sexual practices of the patient they were describing in a treatise. The history of psychology offers many such examples⁷. The cultural thesis of normalcy allowed a more objective approach to pathology. This is perhaps one of Freud's greatest achievements, that which paved the way to a modern pathology.

Normalcy does not refer, according to Freud, to an objective feature of men and women, but indicates a culturally determined, *i.e.*, conventional, social and normative, appraisal of an individual from better to worse. But one has the right to ask how such an appraisal can be made of someone. If, for instance, an individual is 'morally' better, it most certainly does not mean s/he is better on the scale of sanity or normalcy. What is then, in the end, psychological normalcy?

Freud was thus compelled to put forward a theory of normalcy that allowed convention to be based on less arbitrary foundations. In the course of his clinical career, he developed three different theories of normalcy, which in some way, as we will see, are coherent to one another. These three theories do not have a chronological relationship, since we can find them at different periods of Freud's work. He also does not seem to prefer one to the other.

The first theory that will be exposed here is the *adaptive theory* of normalcy. According to this first theory, normalcy is determined by the capacity of an individual to adapt to the exterior world defined as *ananke*⁸. The more adapted one is to the environment, the more 'normal' one will be considered. The particularity of the Freudian adaptive theory in comparison to other such theories that have been formulated in the past is its psychodynamic foundation, where the obstacles to adaptation are identified as conflicting relations of psychical instances: "Both neurosis and psychosis are thus the expression of a rebellion on the part of the id against the external world, of its unwillingness — or, if one prefers, its incapacity — to adapt itself to the exigencies of reality, to Ἀνάγκη [*ananke*: Necessity]" (Freud, 1924e, 19, p. 185; 358f., cf. 1939a, 525; 1926e, 292). Since the adaptive competence is led by the principle of reality, it becomes evident that it is above all the id, as the topographical counterpart of the principle of reality, that hinders the adaptive development.

This first definition of normalcy does not, however, remedy completely the initial vagueness and relativity of normalcy that ensues from its cultural character. One can still ask to what degree adaptation has to be carried out

before an individual is considered normal, thus falling back to an arbitrary, culturally determined convention. Although the adaptive theory of normalcy is not to be disavowed altogether, it has to be completed by a more precise convention pertaining to the state of normality, such that a physician could come forward with a binding judgment on the normalcy or pathology of a patient.

The second definitional theory can be identified as the *libertarian theory* of normalcy, which adopts free will as a criterion. The more free will is stifled in a subject, *i.e.* the less free choice individuals have because of unconscious constraints, the less they can be considered normal. To describe this fact, Freud uses the term "exclusiveness", but above all the word "fixation", which is now a commonplace in popular psychology: "If a perversion has the characteristics of exclusiveness and fixation — then we shall usually be justified in regarding it as a pathological symptom" (Freud, 1905d, 161; 70f.). For a patient who is fixated at a certain stage of his/her psychosexual development, it is impossible to act in another way than what is dictated by the prevailing regressive psychical organization. Pedophiles are rarely unaware of their deviance and of the socially reprehensible character of their behavior, and inevitably feel the reprobation of society. They nevertheless feel they cannot act differently; they lack the liberty to choose other lifestyles.

Unfortunately, even this apparently objective definition of normalcy does not escape cultural arbitrariness. Indeed, it would be easy to argue that the 'normal' individual can also be fixated in his/her socially acceptable behavior. The liberty of a 'normal' individual can be limited to heterosexual practices, qualifying him/her *per definitionem* for the attribute 'pathological'. Heterosexuals are, just as any other so-called 'ab-normal' individuals, unfree in their choice of a sexual partner. Society seems to dictate, in some way, to what type of behavior one is to be free. Another shortcoming of the libertarian definition of normalcy is probably its strict mentalist character, which makes it hardly operationalizable for any practicing physician. Indeed, mental states are difficult to recognize with certainty. A definition that relies rather on behaviorally discernible data would have a definitive practical advantage over this mentalist definition.

This is where the *practical theory* of normalcy comes in. This last conception of normalcy considers pathology in reference to a certain behavioral capacity of acting in a particular way under given circumstances. The behavioral capacity that is more concretely intended by Freud is the ability to enjoy and to perform: "The distinction between nervous health and neurosis is thus reduced to a practical question and is decided by the outcome — by whether the subject is left with a sufficient amount of capacity for enjoyment and of efficiency" (Freud, 1916-17a, 457; 439). For instance, every one of us is susceptible to falling into a depression. Depression,

however, can be considered pathological only once it starts affecting our ability to enjoy (nothing seems to lift one's spirit) and to perform (as for example an incapacity to exercise one's profession). In this sense, it is not surprising to find similar symptoms to those found in neurotic patients in a 'normal' person; but the former will be characterized by the behavioral incapacities described above.

The objections one could formulate against the practical definition of normalcy are directly linked to the paradox of normalcy, which will be described hereafter. Since they belong more specifically to the arguments of Critical Theory, they will be discussed later.

From the background of these three theories, Freud's famous phrase "a healthy person, too, is virtually a neurotic" (Freud, 1916-17a, 457; 439) becomes more comprehensible. The adaptive, libertarian and practical theories of normalcy do not invalidate the conception of normalcy described above as a conventionally determined rupture on a continuum of psychical organization between normal and pathological. They merely try to give a plausible and coherent justification for this rupture. According to psychoanalytical theory, the psychodynamic mechanisms underlying neurosis, such as conflicts between instances of the id and the superego, are present in every psychical organization, even in normal individuals. They become pathological in the clinical sense of the term when they impede the capacity of individuals to adapt to their natural and cultural environment, when they restrict their free-will and their ability to enjoy and perform.

All three definitions have a common denominator in the fact that they recognize normalcy, in one way or the other, as beneficial to society (*kulturförderlich*, cf. Freud, 1908d, 20) and pathology as antisocial⁹. By adapting to society, one acknowledges it; liberty reveals itself as liberty to act in accordance with what promotes society or the liberty to adapt to society; in being productive, both in the sense of enjoying and performing, one assures the reproduction of society. Normalcy and sanity are thus inherently *social* phenomena; and precisely here lies the crux of the paradox that will be discussed in the following section.

The paradox

By its integrating precepts of psychoanalysis in its thought, the Frankfurt School inherited the conception of the continuity between sanity and insanity. Like every other psychoanalytical concept, however, it was considered through the lens of neo-Marxism, that is, from a sociological perspective. This follows a fundamental stance of Critical Theory that was formulated by Fromm in 1932 in his first significant essay *Über Methode und Aufgabe einer Analytischen Sozialpsychologie*: as Marxism should be enriched by

Freudianism, inversely, Freudian theory should be supplemented by the teachings of Marx. Thus, such concepts as *ananke*, i.e. the necessary constraints of life and environment, were not abstractly perceived as the mere natural exterior world, as suggested by Freud, but included the cultural world in which we live, with its classes and class struggles, with its institutions and its state organizations, with its beliefs and ideologies. This Marxist reading of Freud produced an original, coherent and unitary theory of social criticism sometimes referred to as Freud-Marxism. The paradox of normalcy stems precisely from the sociological relativization of the psychological concept of normalcy.

In light of dialectical materialism, the theories of normalcy formulated by Freud seemed to pose problems from the beginning. Horkheimer was the first to raise the question, even before he became associated with the *Institute für Sozialforschung*, the home of Critical Theory, in 1931. Having undergone a psychoanalytical therapy since 1928¹⁰, Horkheimer started reflecting upon issues related to psychoanalysis since his early years of philosophical development. In an early aphorism-collection, Horkheimer states:

There are thoughts which inhibit the capacity to work or to experience pleasure to such a degree that they border on illness. For that reason, psychologists call them neurotic. They are true nonetheless, and if many had them, and had them *all the time*, mankind might perhaps be better off (Horkheimer, 1934, 110; 449)¹¹.

This first critique is timid in comparison to those to come, but it already illustrates the contours of the paradox. One can univocally recognize Freud's practical theory of normalcy reproduced in this quotation through the key expression "ability to work and to enjoy". Horkheimer rightfully states that a person who loses such an ability is considered a pathological case. The "thoughts" he refers to are those about social injustice and misery in this world. For the socialist Horkheimer, these thoughts were true; they stood in accordance with reality. Hence, they could not simply be swept away in order to reinstate the ability to work and to enjoy. On the other hand, these thoughts which lead to neurosis, since they hinder the ability to enjoy one's own privileged state, were judged useful in changing the world because they offered an uneasy illustration of what is to be improved in the world, this uneasiness being a further sting that can push individuals to change the prevailing situation. This means paradoxically that thoughts which cause an inability to work and to enjoy are also capable of changing the world into a better place, which itself implies work. The practical definition of normalcy seemed to fail from a critical-sociological view point.

In response to this critique, a quotation from Fromm, written many years later as a retort to Marcuse in the famous debate that opposed the two, can be called into play: "Even our sadness, which is the last refuge of humanity in an alienated society, is frowned upon. It is described as something neurotic, inappropriate, when in reality, it could become the beginning of a better life"¹². According to Fromm, the sadness that comes with our picturing the world's injustice is not really pathological. Indeed, the ideas of a sane as well as a neurotic revolutionist are equally conceivable: the first follows his/her goal rationally while the second is moved by unconscious compulsive motives. In other words, it is erroneous to contend that the world would be better off if everybody had thoughts that lead to neurosis, since it would impede the ability to work, which ability is essential for any revolutionary act. Inversely, one can have thoughts that are difficult to bear, but have a stimulating effect towards changing the world instead of leading to neurosis.

Horkheimer's first attempt to socially relativize the Freudian concept of normalcy proves, after a brief analysis, to be fallacious. In any case, it does not hold up to scrutiny. This is not overly surprising, since Horkheimer warned, in the German preface to the aphorisms collection, that he was well aware of certain imperfections and contradictions in this work (Horkheimer, 1934, 312), since these were only thoughts he had written on the spur of the moment as a young *Privatdozent*.

However, this anarchic method of writing did prove to be fruitful in another thought from the same book, and in which he points out to a difficulty in the adaptive theory of normalcy: "But can the fighter, let alone another person determine at any given moment how healthy, neurotic, at one or at odds with himself he may be? These bourgeois categories reflect their own world and not the struggle which proposes to unhinge it" (Horkheimer, 1934, 108; 444)¹³. The question can be reformulated as follows: If sanity is defined as the adaptive agreement with society, how should the revolutionist, whose goal is precisely to change the society in which s/he lives, be evaluated with regards to his/her adaptiveness to society? Psychoanalysis cannot determine if the revolutionist is neurotic according to the adaptive definition without falling into a *petitio principii*. Horkheimer thus concludes that the adaptive theory of normalcy represents a bourgeois category, in that it does not take into account the possibility of revolutionary change of society. According to Horkheimer and his followers, only objective criteria given by dialectical materialism (such as the theory of the revolutionary action¹⁴) or by a critical theory of society could determine if the behavior of an individual befits a particular situation.

The paradox is at an early stage of its development in the Frankfurt School. Normalcy is reflected upon in conjunction with the idea of revolution, according to the interests of these early years. Later, this idea of revolution

will no longer be as preponderant in the thought of the Frankfurt School. But the paradox will live on and adapt itself to their interests. Nonetheless, the basis of the paradox is settled: if normalcy is determined relatively to society, then one presupposes that society is as it should be, leaving no choice but to brand as neurotic any nonconformist individual who opposes societal values on the grounds of rational as well as irrational arguments. This definition of the paradox will be refined as we follow its historical development in the Frankfurt School.

Adorno dealt more intensively than any other member of the Frankfurt School with the paradox of normalcy. He considered the problem under the viewpoint of all three definitions given by Freud. In his book *Minima Moralia*, Adorno first radicalizes the problem from the perspective of the adaptive theory, by postulating the neurotic character of society. In doing this, Adorno follows a suggestion made by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*: "If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization — possibly the whole of mankind — have become 'neurotic'?" (Freud, 1930a, 144; 269; cf. 1927c, 43; 177). One notices here the interrogative formulation which indicates cautiousness. Freud insists on the fact that the operation in which a society is declared neurotic lies on an analogy, and must be considered with prudence (*ibid*). Adorno shares this prudence with Freud, and asserts elsewhere (Adorno, 1954, 434-439) that he opposes *stricto sensu* this kind of transposition. When Adorno affirms the sickness of society, he does so metaphorically, and is actually recasting the thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which he and Horkheimer develop the themes of fascism, destruction and barbarity in modern society. So without actually venturing "to embark upon a pathology of cultural communities" (Freud, 1930a, 144; 269) Adorno holds that if this would or could be done, it would disclose the illness of modern culture.

Adorno argues that in the healing process, the adaptation to a sick society results not in a healing, but in a sickening, thereby positing the pathology of normalcy. In other words, 'normal' behavior, in adapting to a sick society, merges into its illness. In a sick society, the sickness of individuals becomes the norm. Inversely, those deemed normal are sick, because they adopt deviant behavior that is considered normal by a sick society¹⁵. In the bourgeois society, normalcy is, according to Adorno, but a facade of itself, and contains repressive traits, in that it not only represses ideologically unwanted material, but also hampers the "flight into illness" (Adorno, 1951 [1944], 58; 64)¹⁶.

To illustrate Adorno's argument, it is perhaps useful to call on Bruno Bettelheim's *Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations* (1943) that was written a year before Adorno composed *Minima Moralia*¹⁷. Bettelheim, who had spent about a year in the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald as a prisoner, describes and analyses his experience in these concentration camps during his American emigration years. Through torture and humiliation the SS achieved, according to Bettelheim, the prisoners' total adaptation to the life in the camp and an identification of the subjugated to the subjugator. The parallel to the therapeutic adaptation of psychoanalysis can easily be drawn. Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, implicitly equates the environment of the concentration camp with that of society. In a barbaric world, as under the fascist regime in Germany during the thirties and the forties, a sadist seems well adapted to his/her world. Still, one would hardly say from the perspective of a more humane world that s/he is 'normal'. For Adorno, there is no doubt that in a sick, or to say the same: barbaric world, the well-adapted individual is not the least sane, but rather sick.

The libertarian definition of normalcy does not contribute to solving the paradox either. We know that sanity can be measured according to the degree of liberty revealed in an individual's behavior. In this sense, if pathology shows itself through the exclusivity of certain actions and the fixation on specific behavioral patterns, healing means on the other hand the recovering of liberty. Now Adorno asks: how is it possible to recover liberty in a repressed society that is completely imbued with coercive power and control? For Adorno, the dialectic of power is inscribed in the very core of reason itself (cf. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), and is thus *per se* inescapable. This contradiction led him to reject psychoanalytical therapy as a fiction of the bourgeois society, since liberty was not to be obtained from psychoanalysis. Rather, psychoanalysis perpetuates the pattern of oppression by ascribing a positive meaning to repression — as a necessary means of cultural evolution, as described in *Civilization and its Discontents* — and refuses the possibility of sickness which would be the normal case for a damaged society.

Finally, Adorno attacks the practical theory of normalcy, whose therapeutic aim is to restore the ability to enjoy and to work. The promise of therapeutic healing is, according to Adorno, an illusion, in so far as the bourgeois society determines in advance what 'enjoy' means: "extravagance and champagne jollity"¹⁸. Happiness becomes a prescribed behavior, and thus reproduces the motive of repression. The ideological character of this type of happiness can also be recognized in its concealing function that makes us unaware of the misery in this world:

It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces, and there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the construction of camps of extermination so far off in Poland that each of our own countrymen can convince himself that he cannot hear the screams of pain (Adorno, 1951 [1944], 62-3; 68).

In view of the horrific spectacle of modern culture¹⁹, which finds its symbol in Auschwitz, happiness can only be the result of an illusion. Thus psychoanalysis, in promising happiness, offers nothing more than an illusion. Conflicts in this context are accepted, without being resolved: misery is perpetuated. In other words, in determining normalcy relatively to society, psychoanalysis not only holds the latter to be an immutable and ideal reference, but in addition, it perpetuates the state of misery inherent in it.

Adorno's critique of the libertarian and practical definitions of normalcy is intrinsically linked to the historical context of the holocaust, and can therefore be less convincing for the contemporary reader. This critique, however, contributes to the general elaboration of the paradox of normalcy in so far as it underscores the societal pole — as opposed to the subjectal pole — of the paradox by engaging in a critique of society.

The idea of the paradox of normalcy accompanied the members of the Frankfurt School many years later. The more negative aspects of the barbarity of the world which they had experienced during the war became less apparent. The paradox was thus brought back mainly to its more logical aspect. In a lecture from 1968, *Die Psychoanalyse aus der Sicht der Soziologie*, Horkheimer raises once again the question of the adequacy of the Freudian criteria for normalcy:

To fit into society, to adapt to existing conditions, to be able to work, to experience pleasure in the current reality is most understandably regarded as 'the' therapeutic responsibility. [...] However, my question is: Isn't there any historical period in which frictionless adaptation and a life filled with pleasure and work would be opposed to the idea of what is right, and therefore to the idea of sanity? Can we imagine social constellations in which a normal life with no psychological symptoms would be pathological, delusional? [...] Would it be too daring to imagine that the concept of sanity could preserve a conception of right, righteousness and rationality within itself, which does not exclude *a priori* as delusional the resistance to

overpowering social and political forces? Would the martyrs of yesterday and today necessarily carry the stigma of illness? Furthermore: according to today's terminology, cruelty is of pathological character in society, in that its bloody actuation collides with criminal law. Was it pathological under Hitler? Should the idea of sanity be incompatible with the practice of torture, whether society approves or disapproves of it? Whether it produces a sense of guilt or legitimate pleasure? *Is the capacity to work and to experience pleasure a satisfactory or an all too positivistic, all too realistic criterion?*²⁰

The terms of the problem are clear: society does not seem, according to Horkheimer, to guarantee any rational criteria that would determine normalcy. For Horkheimer, there were times when the ability to work and to enjoy seemed outright abnormal, pathological. Germany of the thirties and the forties, under the rule of Hitler, represents undoubtedly one of these times. On the other hand, he could imagine a revolutionist, not so well adapted to his/her society in that s/he wanted to change it completely, personifying sanity like no one else. Nevertheless, Horkheimer seems to point to a concept of sanity that, as the idea of Good, transcends societies and their contingent legal and moral systems. If normalcy is to be determined by social norms, how is the latter to be determined? The arbitrariness of the norms of society makes it unfit as a criterion for normalcy and leads to paradoxical results, as the normalcy of the sadist under the Nazi-regime shows. To the very practical definitions of normalcy according to psychoanalysis, Horkheimer sought to add another dimension: that of philosophical reflexion. The question remains aporetic as Horkheimer does not seek to give any definite answer to the question.

Marcuse, another member of the Frankfurt School, takes up the idea of the paradox of normalcy and pronounces outright the sickness of society, which imposes a burden and pressure on the individual. Insofar as people adapt and conform to this society, they have to be declared sick, in opposition to the Freudian definition (Cf. Marcuse, 1956, 42-43), because "'normal' functioning would amount to a distortion and mutilation of human essence"²¹. Similar to Horkheimer, Marcuse seems to set an idea or "essence" of humanity that would serve as an ultimate criterion for the definition of sanity. The essence in question refers in part to the human quest for pleasure described by psychoanalysis; however, recurring to the Marxist theory of revolutionary action, Marcuse goes one step further in that he defines the sick society: "A society is sick when its fundamental institutions and relationships (*i.e.* its structure) are such that it does not allow the use of existing material

and intellectual means for the optimal development of human existence (humanity)²². For Marcuse, the resolution of psychical problems is above all a political question. Since the normal individual is bound to feel the burden of a sick society, s/he will unmistakably become sick. The cure lies not, however, in any manipulation of psychical material, but in the change of society. In this, we recognize the fundamental Freudo-Marxist approach of Marcuse.

Habermas's position on the paradox of normalcy, exposed in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (chapter 12), reveals its strong affinity to Marcuse in the sixties. He adopts all of the latter's opinions on the paradox, especially in its relation to the Marxist theory of revolution. Habermas, however, argues a little more clearly towards the necessity of a systematic and peremptory theory of society that would properly address both poles of the paradox, that is, subjectivity and society. Hence, Habermas argues for the necessity of a completion of Freud with a theory of society. In other words: Freud without Marx is incomplete. In doing so, Habermas states anew a fundamental position of the Frankfurt School, as rendered by Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse.

Dis-solution of the problem

It has now become evident: the true solution of the paradox of normalcy lies in a theory of society which alone can offer a solid criterion for the 'sanity' of society — as the title of Fromm's book from 1955, *The Sane Society*, puts it — through a description of culture processes. This has been the aim of the Frankfurt School for decades now. Even today, this undertaking remains a focal point of Habermas's work. But it seems that a definitive theory of society will never be reached, though the knowledge about many social mechanisms keeps growing. It seems rational to assume that the hermeneutics of society constitutes an infinite process.

Since no theory of society is or will in a near future be at our disposal, then the paradox of normalcy can find no resolution. This means that the psychoanalyst is deprived of an important concept, *i.e.* the concept that serves as norm for the telos of the psychoanalytical practice. Is this to say that the psychoanalyst is engaged in a process without knowing where it leads? How then is psychoanalytical therapy at all possible? The very fact that psychoanalysis exists and, to some extent, has had success shows that these objections are not of great importance for the *practice* of psychoanalysis. Still one must reflect upon the reasons why psychoanalysis is possible even though its goal, towards which all practical operations should converge, remains in the dark.

In his later period, Horkheimer thought he had found a solution to the problem. In a discussion that was partly written down by Pollock in the fifties, Horkheimer claimed: "Inherent in psychoanalysis is the protest against reality. Equilibrium on the basis of inner freedom. Not conformism" (Horkheimer, 1950-70, 195). It is clear that conformism refers to the adaptive theory of normalcy, which cannot be accepted by Horkheimer, since it leads straight to a paradox. The "inner freedom", however, unequivocally points to the libertarian theory of normalcy. Horkheimer thought that this definition of normalcy could avoid the paradox, in that it does not directly rely on the norm of a given society. Inner freedom would determine an equilibrium within the individual, regardless of the norms of society. The neurotic individual, on the other hand, would be subjected to inner constraints that would hinder him/her from freely unfolding his/her life. However, even if Horkheimer refers here to an 'authentic' liberty — as opposed to the appearance of the liberty of the socially integrated individual — the difficulties and shortcomings of the libertarian theory of normalcy discussed above still remain.

If no solution seems to be at hand, a dis-solution of the paradox can be undertaken. This path is given through the Hegelian theory of partial negation (*bestimmte Negation*), which is fundamental in the thought of Critical Theory. Curiously enough, though normalcy constitutes a problem for Critical Theory, the possibility of a dis-solution can be found within the very foundations of Critical Theory. On the basis of partial negation, the members of Critical Theory were given the possibility to condemn contradictions in society without having to picture a perfect society: "It [is] possible to say what is bad about the present society, but it [is] not possible to say what will be good about it. One can only work towards the ultimate elimination of what is bad"²³. Or similarly:

The Jewish prohibition against portraying God, or Kant's against straying into the noumenal world both recognize the absolute whose determination is impossible. This also applies to Critical Theory when it states that evil, primarily in the social sphere but also individuals, can be identified, but that the good cannot. [...] The critical analysis of society points to the prevailing injustice. The attempt to overcome it has repeatedly led to greater injustice. [...] If one wishes to define the good as the attempt to abolish evil, it can be determined. And this is the teaching of Critical Theory. But the opposite — to define evil by the good — would be an impossibility, even in morality (Horkheimer, *Dawn and Decline*, p. 237).

According to the theory prohibiting graven images, one should be suspicious of anyone who claims to know the best form of society — as Robespierre and Stalin claimed to know —, since this type of knowledge cannot be obtained without succumbing to the pitfall of ideology. The essentially negative form of Critical Theory is to be found in this fundamental conviction.

Now Alfred Lorenzer, the psychoanalysis-specialist of the later Frankfurt School, points out that psychoanalytical therapy is founded on a similar structure that corresponds to the theory of partial negation adopted by Critical Theory²⁴. The therapeutic task of the psychoanalyst starts when the patient turns himself/herself critically against phenomena of the personal life, for instance neurotic symptoms, and wishes their dissolution. In this case, there is no need for ethical knowledge of an exemplary life, since the goal of the analyst limits itself to easing the suffering through the abolition of unbearable symptoms. Psychoanalysis seeks not to propose a normative life style, but only to get rid of suffering-related pathological phenomenon. Psychoanalytical therapy operates through a partial negation of that which is unbearable in life.

From this explanation, it becomes clear how the praxis of psychoanalysis is possible without having previously solved the paradox of normalcy: it too relies on a negative dialectic and on the principle banning graven images. Never is normalcy a telos towards which a therapist must strive. The task of determining normalcy does not belong to psychoanalysts, but to the social partners that come to a consensus through a free dialogue. The aim of psychoanalysis is somewhat more modest: through a partial negation, to free the patient of undesirable symptoms, representations or behavior. By the same token, a critical theory of society seeks to alleviate suffering and injustice in society despite never knowing the form of the ideal society²⁵.

This is by no means a solution to the paradox of normalcy, which solution can theoretically be found only in an infinite process. The resolution of the problem is undertaken here through its dissolution; for the theoretical problem of normalcy reveals its nullity in the practical field. In other words, the paradox remains as a theoretical problem, but is dissolved as a practical problem.

In this respect, Habermas remains true to the tradition of Critical Theory. Indeed, Habermas' thought must be understood from this perspective of the banning of graven images, or more concretely, from the perspective of the impossibility of a positive formulation of any utopian state towards which a collectivity should strive. A consistent critic of ideology simply cannot create new ideologies to replace old ones. His/her only option is to criticize existing conditions (*das Bestehende*) in order to eliminate them, not knowing, however, what kind of society will result from this partial negation. This

stance is so fundamental to Habermas's thought that it is no surprise he reacts so vehemently to allusions about the utopianist dimension of his philosophy:

nothing makes me more nervous than the imputation — repeated in a number of different versions and in the most peculiar contexts — that because the theory of communicative action focuses attention on the social facticity of recognized validity-claims, it proposes, or at least suggests, a rationalist utopian society. I do not regard the fully transparent society as an ideal, nor do I wish to suggest *any* other idea... (Habermas, "A Reply to my Critics", p. 235)

The ideal speech situation is not, in Habermas's thought, a societal ideal, but the reconstruction of rational communicative intersubjectivity with its necessary validity-claims: when one communicates rationally, one must make a certain number of claims if communication is to realize its essence. In a second step, various arguments can be immanently criticized according to these claims. This 'transcendental' space thus becomes the ground that allows criticism, but is not an ideal state in which only transparent communication would take place. In fact, Habermas recognizes the positive role of the non-transparencies of the system in *The Theory of Communicative Action*: society has become more *efficient* through the disjunction of the system. Efficiency, however, is not the supreme and only value sought by society. Liberty, and ultimately happiness, should not be sacrificed in the process. What Habermas takes on in his critique of society is less the system itself than the system's "colonizing" of the life-world that would lead to a loss of liberty and happiness.

Even in his latest book *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas explicitly rejects the idea — or ideal — of a completely transparent society. This is the reason he criticizes Joshua Cohen's concept of deliberative politics based on an ideal deliberative procedure that would be applicable to all societal institutions. According to Habermas, the complexity of modern society precludes any such possibility (Habermas, 1992, 305; 641f.). In Habermas's thought, full and complete transparency is not a ideal towards which one should strive, not even asymptotically.

Hence, one can contend that Habermas, as Adorno, also maintains a negative dialectic in his theoretical framework in that he simply attacks negative aspects of society without setting an ideal state (as an absolute spirit or otherwise) that would coordinate reformatory or revolutionary action. However, he does offer the ground of universal pragmatics from which he will allow himself to criticize existing conditions. Whether or not Habermas

consistently formulates his criticisms from this rational ground is another question to which I have answered negatively elsewhere²⁶.

In the end, the paradox of normalcy can be interpreted as the interwoven relationship between subject and society, between the individual and the whole. Only from the static perspective of a fixed dichotomy is it perceived as a paradox. The paradox vanishes, however, in a dialectic to and from movement through which both terms of the dichotomy become in turn *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*, action and passion in the synergic process of individuation, socialization and social formation. Just as the good society must be ascertained by the deliberation of its individuals, the sane individual is to be determined by the norms of a society. In the framework of Critical Theory, both the individual and the social poles must be included in any analysis of human reality. Hence, the apparent contradictions in the psychological concept of normalcy is a consequence of the contradictions inherent in the conception of a society-free individual. From this broader perspective proper to Critical Theory, the imputation of some contradiction seems more difficult to hold.

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Notes

- 1 Cf. Ipperciel, Donald, *Freud als Aufklärer: zur Rezeption der Freudschen Psychoanalyse in der Frankfurter Schule*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996.
- 2 *Ibid*, p. 102ff.
- 3 Cf. Görlich, Bernard; Lorenzer, Alfred; Schmidt, Alfred, *Der Stachel Freud: Beiträge und Dokumente zur Kulturismus-Kritik*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980.
- 4 Cf. Rolf Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule*, p. 298ff., and Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. 98ff.
- 5 Cf. M. Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 111 and note 118, p. 321.
- 6 In fact, Canguilhem contends that Nietzsche borrowed the idea of the homogeneity of pathology and normalcy directly from the famous French physiologist-epistemologist Claude Bernard. Cf. Canguilhem, Georges *Le normal et le pathologique*, p. 16.
- 7 As one example chosen out of a plethora of possibilities the 19th century offers, Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis* is worth pointing out. For instance: "It is strange that X. should have had recourse to such an abominable and nauseating sexual act...", p. 332, etc.
- 8 *Ananke* is a word that Freud borrowed from Parmenides to describe the necessary constraints of life, of the environment on the human subject.
- 9 "Neurosis are antisocial formations" (Freud, 1912-13a, p. 363).
- 10 Besides the didactic motivation related to his undergoing a psychoanalytical therapy, Horkheimer allegedly wanted to rid himself from his phobia of giving lectures without a manuscript. For more details on this episode, see Ipperciel, Donald, *op. cit.*, p. 87f.
- 11 Translated by the author. "Es gibt Gedanken, welche die Arbeits- und Genußfähigkeit bis zu einem Grad hemmen, der an Krankheit grenzt. Die Psychologen werden sie daher für neurotisch erklären. Trotzdem sind sie wahr, und wenn viele sie hätten, und zwar *immer* hätten, stände es vielleicht besser um die Menschheit.
- 12 Fromm, 1962c, p. 229. Translation from German by the author. "Selbst unsere Traurigkeit, die doch die letzte Zuflucht der Humanität in einer entfremdeten Gesellschaft ist, wird uns ausgeredet. Sie wird als etwas Neurotisches, als etwas Unangebrachtes hingestellt, während sie in Wirklichkeit zum Beginn eines besseren Lebens werden könnte" This text was originally written in English ("The Philosophy Basic to Freud's Psychoanalysis", in *Pastoral Psychology*, New York, Vol. 13, 1962), but is hardly available in North American libraries. This is the reason we have recourse to the easily accessible German text from the complete works of Fromm in German.

- 13 Translated by the author: "Aber vermöchte der Kämpfende selbst oder gar ein anderer über ihn jeweil zu entscheiden, wieweit er gesund, neurotisch, mit sich einig oder mit sich zerfallen ist? Diese bürgerlichen Kategorien entsprechen ihrer eigenen Welt und nicht dem Kampf, der sie aus den Angeln heben soll".
- 14 Marx, Karl, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, MEW, IV, p. 467ff.
- 15 A similar argument was held by Fromm a few years later in Fromm, 1955a. Cf. especially chapter 2. Cf. also the interview from 1980 in *Die Zeit*: "The most normal are the most ill, and the ill are the most sane" (translated by author: "Die Normalsten sind die Kränksten. Und die Kranken sind die Gesundesten", *Die Zeit*, 21-03-1980, p. 52.
- 16 Adorno borrows the expression from Freud himself. Cf. Freud, 1930a, 216.
- 17 One can reasonably assume that Adorno and Horkheimer knew of this text, since they had a lot of esteem for Bettelheim, who had worked for a short time with the Frankfurt School. Moreover, the article had attracted much attention throughout America. Cf. "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations", *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 38, 1943, pp. 417-452.
- 18 "Verschwendungssucht und Champagnerfröhlichkeit" (Adorno, 1951 [1944], 67). The German word for "extravagance", literally translated as an "addiction to wastefulness", better conveys the idea of compulsion. As for "champagne jollity", it expresses a cheap, inauthentic and superficial happiness of senses numbed by alcohol.
- 19 In order to give more strength to Adorno's argument concerning the barbarity of modern culture, one must bear in mind that it was written during the Second World War in 1944.
- 20 Translated by the author: "Einordnung in die Gesellschaft, Anpassung ans Bestehende, Fähigkeit zur Arbeit, zum Genuß in der herrschenden Wirklichkeit gilt höchst verständlich als die therapeutische Aufgabe. [...] Meine Frage lautet jedoch: Gibt es nicht geschichtliche Perioden, in denen reibungslose Einfügung, lust- und arbeitsreiches Leben dem Begriff des Richtigen, somit der Gesundheit, widerstreiten; lassen soziale Konstellationen sich denken, in denen ein normales Leben ohne psychisches Symptome pathologisch, wahnhaft ist? [...] Ist die Vorstellung allzu gewagt, daß der Begriff von seelischer Gesundheit eine Konzeption des Rechten, Richtigen, Vernünftigen in sich selbst bewahren könne, die den Widerstand gegen übermächtige soziale und politische Kräfte nicht a priori als Wahn ausschließt; trugen die Märtyrer ehemals, gestern und heute, notwendig das Stigma der Krankheit? Ferner: nach dem heutigen Stand der Terminologie trägt Grausamkeit pathologischen Charakter in der Gesellschaft, in der ihre blutige Betätigung mit dem Strafgesetzt

- kollidiert. War sie unter Hitler krankhaft? Sollte die Idee der Gesundheit mit Ausübung von Folter unvereinbar sein, gleichviel ob von der Gesellschaft getadelte oder approbiert? Gleichviel ob sie Schuldgefühle oder legitimen Genuß produziert? *Ist Arbeits und Genußfähigkeit ein genügendes oder allzu positivistisches, allzu realitätsgerechtes Kriterium?*” (Horkheimer, 1968, 304-305).
- 21 Translated by the author: “‘normales’ Funktionieren auf eine Verzerrung und Verstümmelung des menschlichen Wesens hinausliefe” (*ibid.*, p.43).
- 22 Translated by the author: “Eine Gesellschaft ist krank, wenn ihre fundamentalen Institutionen und Beziehungen (d.h. ihre Struktur) so geartet sind, daß sie die Nutzung der vorhandenen materiellen und intellektuellen Mittel für die optimalen Entfaltung der menschlichen Existenz (Humanität) nicht gestatten” (*ibid.*, p.44).
- 23 “Man konnte sagen, was an der gegenwärtigen Gesellschaft das Schlechte ist, aber man konnte nicht sagen, was das Gute sein wird, sondern nur daran arbeiten, daß das Schlechte schließlich verschwinden würde” (Horkheimer, 1969-72, 339).
- 24 Lorenzer, Alfred, “Psychoanalyse als kritische Theorie”, in: *Max Horkheimer heute: Werk und Wirkung*, 261.
- 25 For a systematic uncovering of a parallel between psychoanalysis and the Habermasian conception of ideology critique, even after *Theory of communicative action*, see Ipperciel, Donald, “L’idée de pathologie de la société chez Habermas”, *Dialogue*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 3 (Summer / Été 1998).
- 26 Beyond his universal pragmatics, his historical theory of rationality based on Weber and his two-level conception of society, Habermas also relies on the fundamental intuition of the opacity of the indeterminate ‘Other’. See Donald Ipperciel, “L’idée de pathologie de la société chez Habermas”, *op. cit.*