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1

Introduction

First Encounters

I first came across Critical Theory in the late 1960s when I bought a copy of Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*. It was bought rather ambivalently for while I was aware of its radical cachet, something that appealed to me, I also knew it was a bestseller, something that for me subtly reduced its status. I thought if it was popular it probably was not very good. In fact someone told me not only was it popular, it was *populist*; then as now this was the ultimate intellectual slight. It took me a while to realise it is better to read books before accepting the judgements of others.

Even after I had bought it I wasn't sure if my money had been well spent. The bright red cover on my Routledge and Kegan Paul paperback declared how many copies had been sold worldwide and to make matters worse the prose inside was impregnable; I could hardly understand a word of it – how could this be populist? Only the intuition that the opening lines of Chapter 1 captured something important about contemporary life kept it alive for me till later:

> A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilisation, a token of technical progress. Indeed what could be more reasonable than the suppression of individuality in the mechanization of socially necessary but painful performances; the concentration of individual enterprises in more effective, more productive corporations; the regulation of free competition among unequally equipped economic subjects; the curtailment of prerogatives and national sovereignties which impede the international organisation of resources. (Marcuse 1994 [1964]: 1)

The sharp irony I heard in his declaration that nothing could be more reasonable than the suppression of individuality in contemporary society struck a true, if discomfiting note. Likewise when he used that peculiar neologism, *un*freedom, rather than constraint or oppression, it alerted me to the insight that the opposite of freedom might now prevail without having announced itself.

It was only a few years later in the early 1970s, as part of a first-year undergraduate sociology course called Industrial Society that I really started to understand what Marcuse was up to in *One Dimensional Man*. In fact it took the patience of a lecturer prepared to give a 'reading class' for those interested, outside normal hours, to unravel its mysteries.

The style of language was the plainest obstacle. Marcuse mostly did not write in short easily absorbable sentences, but in long, roving, muscular phrases where a sentence could last a whole paragraph and where the subject and object of the sentence seemed only distant cousins. In fact, in some sentences, qualifying clauses themselves became a kind of collective subject–object. In dialectical fashion each clause reciprocally (re)defined the one that went before while simultaneously adding meaning to the one that came after. The effect was to produce a shimmering fresco of ideas, which allowed the author to explore complex ideas complexly. It forced the reader to hold a variety of interrelated ideas together and allowed them to co-mingle and influence each other. It did not foreshorten this process by resolving the sentence with a straightforward conclusion. I should add that only gradually did I find such writing the almost palpable trigger to thought it can be and, whatever difficulties I experienced reading Marcuse, they were small beer compared to those I would face with his colleague, Adorno.

Critical Theory, Speculation and the Facts

I, like any other youngster growing up in the UK, had been subtly influenced by the assumptions of an Anglo-American tradition of thought where empirical facts were always the privileged entity. The speculative thread that runs throughout Critical Theory was certainly regarded by some of my teachers with suspicion as being a heady mixture of ideology and unjustified assertion. Perhaps the times were ripe for change, but I found myself increasingly and happily vulnerable to Critical Theory's anti-empiricist bias and the importance it placed on relations between the facts. I learnt, what is now a cliché in sociology, that facts do not speak for themselves, but that it is the network of relations in which facts are embedded that produces explanatory significance and that this is something different to statistical significance.

I also learnt from Critical Theory that speculation should not be thought a pejorative term. In everyday English usage, the word 'speculation' suggests something vague and probably unjustified, the kind of thing journalists mischievously use to amplify a story when they are short on facts. Certainly, it is the kind of thing that positivist minded social scientists warned me against. But because Critical Theory always sought to bring the social sciences into conjunction with philosophy I discovered the role of speculation could be seen in a quite different light. The importance of Hegel's work to first generation of Critical Theorists should not be underestimated. Marcuse (1973 [1941])

in particular explicitly drew out Hegel's ideas on the intrinsically speculative nature of reason to form the basis of Critical Theory's critique of empiricism. Marcuse argued that in the wake of natural science's success modern forms of thought had come to deify facts. Facts had come to be seen as the pure vessel in which truth was to be found. The effect of this was to trivialise speculation as something dubiously un-factual. For Marcuse though, as for Hegel, what was dubious was the foreshortening of reason in favour of facts, indeed Marcuse calls this an 'abdication of reason' (1973: 20).

For Critical Theory, 'speculation' was a vital element of reason; it is related to the word 'speculum' or mirror that reflects something else. When we understand something we reflect or mirror its image. This reflection has no being of its own but is what appears to us at that point. The speculative person is one who does not dogmatically accept this or that appearance as being all there is, but recognises that appearances mirror a particular historical relation between subject and object. I learnt that when Critical Theorists wrote in their to-and-fro dialectical style, shifting back and forth between subject and object, they were only echoing what they saw as the properly speculative element in reason itself.

Dialectical Reason and Politics

However, whilst dialectical thought is a methodological principle for Critical Theory, I also learnt it was emphatically a political one too. For Marcuse the positivist-empiricist (I use the words to mean virtually the same thing) emphasis on the givenness of facts entails a distinctly conservative acceptance of things as they are. By 'givenness', I mean the idea that for the empiricist social scientist what appears as factual evidence is taken as the basis for the truth of the situation, such that only contrary facts could change it. If a particular society believes certain things to be true about its system of justice for example, the empiricist must accept that justice can only mean what can be observed as justice in that situation. Its conservatism lies in its indifference to, and acceptance of, empirical appearances, of what is 'given' to the observer at a particular point. Marcuse is not making a direct link between empiricism and political conservatism, though he is sometimes accused of it, but that the relation between empiricism and any social condition while not one of advocacy is one of detached compliance (see Katz 1982: 98).

Critical Theory by contrast always had a concern with how things had come to be the way they are and what they might be in the future, a concern with the wider truth or validity of what is currently the case. As Marcuse put it, 'the real field of knowledge is not the given facts about things as they are, but the critical evaluation of them as a prelude to passing beyond their given form' (1973: 145). For Marcuse, the distinction Hegel made between essence and existence was a crucial one. Where existence referred to what actually exists,

essence referred to what might yet come into being, a potentiality. For human justice to exist, to be justice at all, it must suggest the potentiality for fairness, rightness, equity, and so forth. The form justice actually takes at a particular time can, and should, be critically measured against the potential inherent in the concept for higher levels of fairness, rightness and equity. If a society frustrates its potential for realising the higher states it should be prone to critique from within its own walls. Therein lies the potential for something more thoroughly rational to emerge. Such critique, I discovered, was termed 'immanent critique', and Critical Theory's task, at least at this stage in the 1930s and early 1940s, was to articulate immanent critique.

Critical Theory, then, aimed to be dialectical, not just because such an outlook echoed the speculative nature of reason, but also politically because reason and reality were intimately tied in with each other. Critical Theory claimed the back and forth quality of dialectical reasoning reflected its immanent relation to social reality, which was a dialectical process too. In a dialectical relationship one element in the process is presupposed by, and contains an opposing element as part of its own identity. The two are a unity of opposites. In our modern world, Critical Theory argued, various forces are set in opposition to, but interlinked with, each other: science and technology as emancipatory or destructive; culture as stimulating or tranquillising, art as progressive or regressive, and so forth. The task for Critical Theory was to interrogate these dialectically related opposites and discern the outlines of what could become a more rational state of affairs.

Justifying Critique

The linking of these Hegelian ideas with a Marxian emphasis on the material nature of existence is what originally put the 'critical' in Critical Theory. Critical Theorists used the word 'critical' to refer to the idea of critique, rather than just criticism. 'Critique' appears in the title of many of Marx's writings and was part of an effort to distinguish his approach from that of other radicals. Mere criticism, he argued, involves imposing norms onto facts, as it were, from the outside. The (mere) critic objects to particular things for his or her own reasons, and criticises them on this basis. This approach privileges the critic's position but doesn't justify it. It involves a kind of dogmatism in that it *assumes* the critic's position is valid prior to applying it, and exempts the position from having to meet its own critical criteria. In making its own position invisible (mere) criticism is self-defeating as it is prone to infinite regression. One (mere) critic's views can be criticised by another (mere) critic's views, and so on, ad infinitum, without one view ever being found more valid than any other (see Benhabib 1986: 32ff).

By contrast, critique that is immanent or indwelling presupposes the criteria that are present in the situation, criteria by which the situation judges itself,

and asks whether it meets its own raison d'être. On this account critique seeks to pull reality towards what it ought to be, what is immanent to it and what, if all other things were equal, it would become. It is often claimed, for example, that in the same way that a free market is best at meeting the economic needs of individuals, so capitalism's political organisation, based on 'possessive individualism' is best at meeting the individual's need for justice and freedom: there is a corollary between the two. The term 'possessive individualism' was coined by C. B. MacPherson (1962) to capture the idea that our western sense of the importance of a right to own things, especially ourselves, and to be, as it were, the proprietors of our own lives, runs deeper than first appears. However, if one confronts, or as Critical Theory puts it, 'negates' these claims with the fact that the free market is dominated by multinational corporations and is indifferent to the interests of individuals, then a different critical picture emerges. Critical Theory's critique of industrial capitalism in the late 1930s and 1940s located itself at the disjunction between ostensible claims and what actually happens, which is where the potential for new more rational forms of thought and action might appear.

Although amongst the post-1960s' generation of Critical Theorists, notably Jürgen Habermas, there has been a clear shift away from the Hegelian and Marxian motifs articulated by the first generation Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno, the underlying concern to *ground* or justify critique has persisted. In sociology, in the last twenty years, there has been a rejection of positivist assumptions, notably of the idea of the value-free, disinterested observer and with it a corresponding marked increase in what might be called morally involved critique, something which at times has veered towards mere moralism. Although such changes seem to echo the spirit of Critical Theory's anti-positivism, they are in certain respects at odds with it. As a tradition, Critical Theory has always sought to ground or base its critique in something more substantial than high dudgeon. It has always believed that critique must be justified, not by reference to some contingent source of ire, but to something that relates in a more ultimate sense to the human condition. Only then will critique be able to make claims of a kind that have a universal reach, claims that ask to be thought the harbinger of a more rational future.

Critical Theory and Reason

Even in my early, faltering efforts to understand Critical Theory via *One Dimensional Man* and *Reason and Revolution* (1973 [1941]), I learnt that a central characteristic of the tradition was the importance it attributed to Reason, and reason sometimes spelt with a capital 'R'. It was never easy to work out exactly what reason meant to Critical Theorists, nor why they were sometimes inclined to capitalise the first letter. However, I gradually came to see that for them Reason proper was an altogether bigger and more signifi-

cant concept than *mere* reason. Part of their aim was to challenge what currently passed for reason, and extend it into something more comprehensive. Again, it was Marcuse who opened the door.

He pointed out that Hegel had made reason the defining characteristic of being human (Marcuse 1973: 5–11). Where a stone, for example, is always a stone, and is altered only by the effects of other things working on it, a plant exists more thoroughly in a state of 'becoming'. 'It unfolds and develops itself . . . it is not now a bud, then a blossom, but is rather the whole movement from bud through blossom to decay' (1973: 11–12). It comes close to being a 'subject' in a distinctively human sense in that its development is not simply imposed on it from the outside. However the plant does not 'comprehend' what it is doing, it just does it, weather and soil permitting. Only with the human subject can we talk of a self-conscious awareness of doing things, of a measure of deliberation being involved. As Marcuse (1973: 9) put it:

> Man *(sic)* alone has the power of self-realisation, the power to be a self-determining subject in all processes of becoming, for he alone has an understanding of potentialities and knowledge of 'notions'. His very existence is the process of actualising his potentialities, of moulding his life according to the notions of reason.

On this account the human world was not co-extensive with nature and made up of flat, empirical objects as positivism would have it, but something that had to some degree risen out of nature, and eluded nature's causal processes.

Reason enabled humans to have the potentiality for self-determination. Unsurprisingly then, reason was also intimately tied in with that other key Critical Theory concept – freedom or emancipation. In fact, freedom and reason were to be seen as dialectically related (Marcuse 1973: 9). Reason presupposes freedom because to reason involves being able to orientate oneself towards determining one's own life. On the other hand freedom presupposes reason, because only through reasoning could we decide what a better, more emancipated life would be like.

For Marcuse, not only was freedom to be found closely related to reason, but also they were both to be thought close cousin to the idea of the self-conscious human subject, and of 'geist' or mind-spirit. The human subject only comes into its own, only really becomes fully fledged slowly, through an historical process of self-formation. Only human subjects possessed of mind could come to recognise themselves, not just as a part of nature, but in some degree, apart from nature. Reason with a capital 'R', for Critical Theory I found, was at the centre of this web of possibilities.

In *Reason and Revolution* Marcuse had argued that empiricism threatened to kill off Reason in the larger sense by denying the possibility of 'universals'. The idea that there might be generally (universally) valid truths presupposed by the human condition, of which the current facts are but one moment in

their development, and that the status quo should be challenged on this basis, was ruled out of court by empiricism. For empiricism, either something could be observed as factually universal, or it could not. If not, and of course nothing finally could be, then claims about Reason and freedom being 'universal goods' related to the human condition, were pie in the sky. They were merely the product of local 'custom or habit' or a 'psychological mechanism' (1973: 18, 20). In empiricist terms, if there was to be criticism of the status quo, it could not spring from any inherent lack or contradiction in reality, but only from someone imposing their 'subjective' values in a critical manner onto an objective, factual, situation.

Originally I found it confusing that Marcuse's rejection of the empiricist version of reason and his bullish advocacy of an Hegelian alternative in 1941, was at odds with the gloomy mood of his *One Dimensional Man* in 1964. However, I learned that Critical Theory responds to historical changes and that the two outlooks were not unconnected[1]. While *Reason and Revolution* was concerned with Hegel's critique of empiricism, in the latter stages it was also concerned with a general critique of philosophical positivism and its conservative 'political' assumptions. In *One Dimensional Man,* Marcuse drew out these moral and political implications, showing how much, by 1964, they had gained ground and that this heralded the closing down of the political and social world.

Reason had become, he argued, a pale and rather malevolent shadow of its real self. Reason under the aegis of empiricist assumptions had turned away from larger, universal questions of what freedom and justice might look like, and become concerned only with what it could do with what already exists: the facts. Anyone who spoke of these larger matters could have their ideas dismissed as ideological or metaphysical, or just plain subjective. The task reason had now set itself was to become an instrument for manipulating facts, a facility for measuring only what was technically feasible. I could see this form of reason bore more than a passing resemblance to Max Weber's account of the process of 'rationalisation' (Zweckrationalität), where the best means for achieving a given end hold sway over concerns with the validity of the end. Marcuse identified it in political terms as the correlate of a subtle form of social control. The application of this technical, one-dimensional reason enabled industrial-capitalist societies to produce and consume goods at ever higher levels, though the price to be paid was in correspondingly ever higher levels of conformity, assimilation and unfreedom. The latter being the opposite of what such societies claimed to be about.

Marcuse's critique of positivism did not go unchallenged. The English radical, Sidney Hook, criticised it on the grounds that for science, facts were not 'given' but were things to be discovered, and the relation they bore to our ideals and principles would reveal how intelligently we had chosen the latter. It should be noted though that Marcuse never denied the relevance of facts as such, indeed he believed that empiricism with its focus on fact had

originally been radical and effective in challenging superstitious pre-modern ideas. Problems arose when the facts of a particular situation restricted thought, as though those facts were all that we could conceive as existing (see Kellner 1984: ch. 5 and relevant footnotes).

Marcuse's argument in *One Dimensional Man* was Hegelian and Marxist (and much else besides). I had expected this would entail him giving priority to collective entities such as social classes, but what was, and still is, striking, is the vehemence of his defence of the individual, and the way he rails against the loss of authentic individualism in societies that proclaim it most loudly. Though I did not know it at the time, Critical Theory is a highly variegated tradition and such surprises should be expected. It has always been intellectually loose-limbed, comprising a wide variety of authors subject to diverse influences and with distinct intellectual styles, personalities and interests of their own. It may never have quite become the transdisciplinary theory its founders hoped for, but its capacity to cover an extraordinarily wide range of topics revealing the interplay of the personal, social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of life from a more or less common point of view, is remarkable.

A cursory glance at four Critical Theory readers, namely Arato and Gebhardt (1978), Bronner and Kellner (1989), Ingram and Simon-Ingram (1992), and Rasmussen (1996) reveal the range of its ideas. They extend from 'lyric poetry' to 'state capitalism', from 'the fetish character of music' to the idea of a 'legitimation crisis', from 'the social implications of technology' to 'surrealism', from 'critical theory and the public sphere' to 'critical theory and postmodernism'. Indeed, an ever present danger in recounting the tradition is the unwitting habit one has of rounding up loose ends the better to render the whole thing more coherent for the reader; something certainly out of tune with the spirit of Critical Theory.

Appearance and Reality

Nevertheless there are common threads, which exist in part because authors sometimes collaborated with each other, or because theoretical development took place on the basis of mutual critique; but even beyond this there are surprising elements of common purpose. For example, Marcuse attacked the predominant empiricist-positivist paradigm of the time with what he believed was its inability to see anything beyond appearances. Some forty years on and a lot of theoretical change later, Jürgen Habermas, the most famous of the second generation, in a similar way challenged what he saw as the neo-conservatism of postmodernist thought and its commitment to appearances.

This is not to suggest that Habermas's work continues Marcuse's; he made clear in the late 1960s that he has a more receptive to attitude towards positivism, science and the 'facts', than did Marcuse (Habermas 1971a: ch. 6). Yet Habermas's critique of poststructuralism and more broadly postmodernism is

similarly based on the idea that appearances, in this case 'cultural' appearances, are not all there is to society. He argues that postmodernism has mistaken cultural appearances for being the whole of the story, and lost track of the fact that postmodern culture is the outcome of wider societal processes. Like Marcuse he still holds to the idea that the task of Critical Theory is to broaden our conception of reason and bring it to fruition in a more rational society. For both, reason and modernity are unfinished projects, things not yet fully formed, and thus not to be rejected prematurely (Habermas 1996).

Summary

In this chapter I have introduced some of Critical Theory's basic themes via my own first encounters with its train of thought. At first I found its authors' style of writing confusing and difficult, but gradually learnt that the way they wrote was tied in with how they saw the world. Their approach was dialectical in that it tacked back and forth between ideas, gradually elucidating one in terms of another and in doing this was naturally speculative. In contrast to empiricism, Critical Theorists regarded speculation in a positive light rather than as the poor relation to thought based only on facts. It reversed the usual priority empiricism accorded to the facts, arguing that facts had to be understood, not as 'given', but in terms of the circumstances that produced them. Empiricism's failure lies in the way it foreshortens the full implications of reason by limiting its emphasis to the manipulation of facts to achieve given ends. Critical Theory, by contrast, has always believed that Reason in a wider sense should also be concerned with the nature of ends, something that entails a critical-evaluative focus on human potential for emancipation.

While in recent years a variety of different streams of thought have challenged the pre-eminence of empiricism in the social sciences, what makes Critical Theory unique is its need to ground or justify its critique of the status quo. For Critical Theory, critique needs to be more than criticism. It must be immanent to, or grounded in, particular historical circumstances and the potential they have to generate a better life.

My early engagement with Critical Theory was focused on Marcuse's work, but as such it provided me with access to themes and ideas that surface and resurface throughout the tradition. I discovered later that his concern with the gap between appearance and reality, with the withering of the individual in individualistic societies, with the idea of grounding critique and of extending the concept of reason, all figure as general themes throughout the tradition.

However, before looking at these and other themes in more detail, I want to put the material in context by presenting a broad overview of the tradition as it developed from the 1920s onwards, with particular reference to the shift from the first to the second generation.

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