ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The rational critique of social unreason. On critical theory in the Frankfurt tradition

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By "critical theory" in a general sense, we mean a unity of philosophical reflection and social scientific analysis informed by an interest in emancipation; all critical theories methodologically and normatively aim at uncovering forms of social domination and inquire into the possibilities of overcoming them. Critical theory in the tradition of what has been called the "Frankfurt School," however, means something more specific: It develops a historically situated and normatively reflexive, systematic *rational* critique of existing forms of social *unreason* that are ideologically presented as forms of (individual and social) *rationality* — "the unreason of the dominant reason" (Adorno, 2005/1962, p. 151). It explains why that is the case (that is, it unveils the *rationale* for such unreason) and it also conceives of a (more) *rational* form of a social and political order.[1] Specifically, it asks why the existing power relations within (and beyond) a society prevent the emergence of such an order. This is consistent with Horkheimer's (2002/1937, p. 199; tr. amended) original understanding of critical theory as "a theory guided at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life."

As the history of this demanding theoretical program demonstrates, it poses a multitude of difficult questions: How should the "interest in emancipation" be defined so that it is truly emancipation that is being sought and not just another desire to dominate? What kind of social theory (one that includes concepts of power and ideology) is available for the negative work of critique as well as for positively identifying potentials for progress? Most importantly: Which conception of reason should be used when what is at issue is both an existing "irrational" (though functionally rational) social and political order as well as the prospect for one that has a more "rational" form?

It is a characteristic of Frankfurt-type critical theory that, despite its numerous transformations, including the radical critique of reductive, one-sided instrumental rationality in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it retains Horkheimer's original idea that the notion of reason developed in Kantian and Hegelian idealism had to be systematically connected to a structural-empirical (including psychological) analysis of social forces in order to identify the "rationality" of existing unreason. Social philosophy, Horkheimer (1993b/1931, p. 6) says in his programmatic speech from 1931, when he started the interdisciplinary program at the Institute for Social Research, searches to understand individual and social reality in a non-positivistic way, by seeking to include in its analysis "a higher, autonomous realm of being, or at least a realm of value or normativity in which transitory human beings have a share, but which is itself not reducible

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to mundane events." For critical theory this is essential , since it was the idealist tradition that identified theoretical as well as practical reason with the faculty of principled critique and of moral-political autonomy as emancipation. In Horkheimer's words: "overcoming class domination (…) is, to put it abstractly, the materialist content of the idealist concept of reason" (Horkheimer 2002/1937, p.242: tr. amended).

To be sure, critical theory could not and cannot rely on an "objective" metaphysical theory of reason, as Horkheimer (2004/1947, p. 4) defined it in his *Eclipse of Reason*: "It aimed at evolving a comprehensive system, or hierarchy, of all beings, including man and his aims." Therefore, if we want to hold onto the idea of a rational critique of social unreason and the corresponding idea of a (more) reasonable social and political order, and in this sense continue the Frankfurt program, we need to redefine reason in a self-critical, non-reductive as well as non-reifying, intersubjectivist way, that is, as more than mere instrumental or strategic rationality, to use the terms of Habermas' comprehensive effort to update the approach in his *Theory of Communicative Action*. For Frankfurt critical theory, such reduction was the main problem of modern notions of reason (especially in their capitalist form): they turned everything into a possible object for rational use. "For positivism, which has assumed the judicial office of enlightened reason, to speculate about intelligible worlds is no longer merely forbidden but senseless prattle" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002/1944, p. 19). Such thinking can no longer transcend the given, taking orientation from principles of reason—which is true of empiricist positivism as well as of any negativistic Nietzschean rejections of such principles. At the same time, given the imperative of self-criticism, charges of a possible cultural bias of such a program need to be taken seriously, radicalizing the search for justifiable grounds for critique.[2]

In my view, the *systematic unity* of normative reflection and social-scientific analysis which is characteristic of critical theory requires *mediating terms* between "facts" and "norms," i.e., between social reality and normative principles—terms that both convey the reality of "rational unreason" and unlock the potentials for social rationality, while exhibiting its basic principles. According to this idea of theoretical unity, the concepts used for the destructive as well as the constructive aspects of critique spring from a common source; the analysis of domination as well as non-domination, of unreason as well as reason, has to be carried out from within one overarching framework. In my own attempts to rethink critical theory, the concept of justification serves that role.[3] I interpret the question of a rational order normatively as the question of a *justifiable* order and, in the next step, I turn the notion of justification reflexively into a theoretical *and* a practical one and seek to analyze and find ways to transform existing *orders* and *relations of justification* such that those subject to them become their (equal) normative authorities. This approach allows for a *twofold* analysis of normative orders: First, it treats justifications that legitimize and constitute such orders as social facts for a critical examination of their emergence, stability, and function—i.e., their "rationality"; and, second, it takes a critical stance on these justifications by scrutinizing their rational justifiability (given certain criteria of justification). "Justifications" and corresponding "orders," therefore, are the object, on the one hand, of a *descriptive* and critical analysis and, on the other, of *normative* critique. When we speak of "justifications," in this twofold way, we are not only thinking of "good justifications" but also of ones which are socially effective as forms of power, even if (and perhaps because) they have an ideological character. *Ideology* is here defined negatively and quite simply: it justifies what cannot be justified and thus silences doubt and critique. In Adorno's words: "*Ideology is justification*" (Adorno 1979/1954, p.465; tr. R.F.).

Such an approach requires a de-reification of conventional philosophical definitions of crucial concepts that suppress their practical, political, and emancipatory character. This is where critical and, if you will, "traditional" theories part company. First of all, it requires a reinterpretation of the theories of reason going back to Kant, as, correctly understood, his concept of reason remains the most radical one, identifying the voice of critical reason with the discursive, *autonomous* voice of all as justificatory equals bound only by principles of reasonable justification and mutual respect.[4] This voice, to be sure, is in reality never heard in purity, but it manifests itself in struggles for and achievements of emancipation. Emancipation means to "become what you are" as much as possible: a normative authority equal to others.

Reason, understood in this way, is the faculty of finding and being guided by proper reasons or justifications. A critical theory of reason thus analyzes the social causes of the lack of social reasoning through various methods of identifying "unreason" in the public sphere, in political discourses generally, in social structures but also in science as

well as everyday communication (Forst, 2023).[5] This allows for a distinction between powerful social "rationalities" and forms of reason that unveil these (possibly irrational) rationalities; both notions of rationality are of a discursive nature, but the first is sociological, the second of a normative kind. Both are essential for a practice of ideology critique that identifies those perversions of reason that turn concepts like "democracy" into an authoritarian means to deprive social groups of their basic rights, call self-absorbed arbitrariness and the economic exploitation of others "freedom," or refer to a compensation for some of the worst forms of structural injustice as "justice," while leaving these structures intact.

As Habermas taught us, a theory cannot claim to be "critical" unless it seeks explicit reassurance about its concept of reason.[6] For no matter how much critical theory opposes the "pathologies of reason" in modernity, it nevertheless always subjects, as Axel Honneth (2009, p. 28) emphasizes, claims to "universality—which should, at the same time, be both embodied by and realized through social cooperation—to the standards of rational justification." There is only one faculty of critique, and it is that of reason (cf. Adorno, 2005/1962, p. 158).

According to the twofold nature of normative orders, the question of justification always arises in concrete contexts and equally points beyond them. One can try to offer the best possible answer to a normative question within the conventional context of established norms and institutions. But one can also place these norms and institutions in question, whether immanently (do they fulfill their purpose?) or radically (is this purpose justifiable at all?). That is why the demand for justification cannot be restricted by appealing to a Hegelian form of *Sittlichkeit*. Justification practices have a historical apriori but are not determined by it; reason transcends its particular circumstances, though always in a situated way.

For example, who would want to suggest to critics of capitalist exploitation or of a caste system that they should please proceed in an "immanent" way? Are such practices and systems only unjust on the basis of their "own" principles, assuming there are any at hand that one can use for critique? Similarly, why remind a critic of patriarchy in a given society in which this was hardly ever challenged that she should not speak a "foreign language"? Would that not amount to ostracizing such critics from social discourses?[7] Radical criticism may be immanent *or* transcending so that it is no longer clear where the one form of criticism ends and the other begins—as, for example, when Luther described the Pope as the "Antichrist," the Levellers declared the King to be the servant of the people "by the grace of God," or Marx saw bourgeois society as the locus of modern slavery. Settled ethical life is the *object* of criticism, not its *ground* or *limit*. To recall the words of Adorno (1973/1966, p. 182): "The limit of immanent critique is that the law of the immanent context is ultimately one with the delusion that has to be overcome." Critical theory knows of no imperative of "immanent" critique, for every such critique would have to provide an *independent* reason *which* "immanent" norms are right and *how* they ought to be interpreted. Recourse to mere historical-social facticity cannot be a rational ground for answering these questions; immanence is no criterion of reason.[8] In a given social situation, progressive as well as regressive values and norms are internal to the social horizon of justification; thus we are in need of other criteria of justification to distinguish the former from the latter. Only the principle of justification itself, as a principle of reason, can generate such criteria—in practical contexts where reciprocally and generally binding norms are at issue, reciprocity and generality are such criteria.

The perspective outlined enables us to define a conception of *progress* that cannot be suspected of disguising ethnocentrisms behind this claim.[9] Only those processes can count as progress that break open orders of justification in ways that make new forms of reciprocal and general justification possible, so that those affected *themselves* can autonomously determine in which direction their society should develop. A critical theory cannot dispense with such a notion of progress. In my *Toleration in Conflict* (2013), I reconstruct the history of struggles for toleration as a dialectical story: where emancipation was possible, "higher" forms of (reciprocally and generally) justifying toleration were achieved while facing various counter-narratives denying such forms or undermining them by using the language of toleration in a hierarchical, dominating way.

A broad series of basic concepts must be de-reified or re-politicized in the light of these orientations.

This is especially true of the concept of *justice*. The question of justice should not be answered in an apolitical way in terms of a false picture that looks at packages of goods or minimum standards of welfare (Forst, 2014a, chap. 1).

For these could just as well be conferred on "those in need" by a benevolent dictator or a correctly programmed distribution machine. Rather, political and social justice requires an *autonomous* collective process of establishing social and political conditions that aim to realize a basic structure of justification. Thus, the question of power, qua social and political power that shapes collective processes, is central to justice. Horkheimer (1993a/1933, p. 40) stresses the reflexivity of the concept: "That is the universal content of the concept of justice; according to this concept, the social inequality prevailing at any given time requires a rational justification. It ceases to be considered as a good, and becomes something that should be overcome." Obviously, a critical account of justice needs to be of a transnational nature. Given the realities of past colonialism still present in global asymmetries of power, this has always been the case, though it has not always been taken into account (Forst, 2020; Ibsen, 2023).

Like the concept of justice, the concept of *power* also needs to be de-reified and redefined. Power should be understood in processual terms as the ability to determine, or even to close off (or also to open up) the space of reasons for others, whether based on a good argument, an ideological justification, or a threat. Social power does not have its primary "seat" in some material means or in institutions, but instead in the *noumenal* space of justifications in which struggles over meaning and hegemony take place (Forst, 2017a, chaps. 2 and 3). The concept of power is neither positively nor negatively charged; only its modes of exercise, ranging from "empowerment" to domination and oppression, whether interpersonal or structural, must be differentiated and evaluated. Structural social power can be explained only by reconstructing the *justification narratives* that shape and in part constitute a normative order (and its subjects). Here a genealogy in the Foucauldian sense creates an important normative distance.[10] In this perspective, as suggested above, one can also develop an understanding of ideology that does not operate with problematic constructions of "genuine interests," but instead proceeds on the basis of a right to justification that is falsely portrayed by ideologies either as non-existent or as already satisfied. The point of this perspective on critique is that *both* emancipatory and ideological uses of power ought to be analyzed as moves in the space of justifications. This is what the principle of the systematic unity of social and normative theory entails.

Another essential concept that must be de-reified is that of *democracy*. Democracy does not designate a fixed institutional model. Rather, it must be understood as a process of public criticism and justification, both within and outside of institutions, in which those who are subjected to rule progressively become the co-authors of their political order. Democracy on this conception is the political form of justice.

From here, further concepts in need of re-politicization also become accessible. *Human rights*, for example, are not a means of satisfying the pleas for help of beings in need but are instead rights to be involved in all aspects of the design of the social and political order to which one is subjected. Their core consists of the basic human right to justification and non-domination (Forst, 2010).

Against this background, it becomes possible to formulate a political concept of *alienation* such as the one sketched by Horkheimer (2002/1937, p. 204, tr. amended) (and central to Marx):

> The collaboration of humans in society is how reason exists for them; this is how they apply their powers and thus confirm their own rationality. But at the same time their work and its results are alienated from them, and the whole process with all its waste of work-power and human life, and with its wars and all its senseless wretchedness, seems to be an unchangeable force of nature, a fate beyond human control.

The goal of a critical theory is to overcome this false, alienating form of rationality—that is, alienation from social reality (properly understood) and from the possibility of political intervention as a form of collective action. Social alienation consists in not seeing oneself and others as what one truly "is" (yet is not allowed to be): as socially, morally, and politically autonomous subjects of justification or as equal normative authorities within a normative order (Forst, 2017b). It may also prevent them from living a "good life," but that is a different story.

In this light, other normative terms can be reinterpreted. A critical theory of toleration, for example, as indicated above, unveils those forms of toleration in which dominant groups produce second-class groups who are merely "tolerated"—while toleration between normative equals who differ in their conceptions of the good life is a democratic alternative (Brown & Forst, 2014; Forst, 2013).

In my view, then, critical theory must be reconfigured as a critique of relations of justification. This calls, on the one hand, for a critical social scientific analysis of social and political relations of *domination* that includes cultural and, not least, economic structures and relationships. In this regard, two dimensions of domination must be distinguished: subjugation to unjustifiable norms and institutions, and subjugation to conditions that prevent practices of justification. Such critical analysis must be combined with a discourse-theoretical, genealogical critique of the justifications and justification narratives that confer legitimacy on unjustifiable relations. On the other hand, we must pose the constructive question of how a "basic structure of justification" can be conceived as a requirement of fundamental justice and be realized in social practice—not as an ideal or a model to be imposed on societies, but as a normative order to be developed autonomously.

Essentially, a theory we call *critical* ought to be based on the *principle of criticism itself*. Its medium is reason striving for practices of autonomous justification among equals.

ENDNOTES

[1] See, among many works, Martin Jay's (2016) excellent reconstruction of this program. For the purposes of this short piece, I do not systematically distinguish between reason and rationality, though I essentially rely on the notion of Vernunft in the tradition after Kant. For a more recent account, see my *The Noumenal Republic* (Forst 2021).

[2] See my debate with Amy Allen (2014 and 2016) in Forst (2014b) and in Allen and Mendieta (2019).

[3] See Forst (2013, 2014a, 2017a, 2021 and forthcoming); from an interdisciplinary perspective, see the work done in the Normative Orders Research Centre in Forst and Günther (2011 and 2021).

[4] See also Habermas (2019) and O'Neill (2015). Compare Adorno (2005/1962, p. 152) on the importance of Kant, saying that we should read "his entire thought as a dialectic of enlightenment, which the dialectician par excellence, Hegel, does not notice." He refers to Kant identifying the dominating as well as liberating aspects of reason at the same time

[5] As an example, see the excellent analysis of contemporary forms of authoritarianism in Brown, Gordon and Pensky (2018) as well as King (2021).

[6] On this, see in general Habermas (1984/87).

[7] On this, see Narayan (1997). This is also the point at which certain forms of "postcolonial" criticism become inverted into their opposite – that is, into essentialist and culturalist homogenizations of non-Western cultures or societies. See my debate with Amy Allen (Allen & Mendieta, 2019).

[8] See my debate with Benhabib (2015; Forst, 2015) on this as well as the notion of immanent critique by Jaeggi (2018), which, I believe, is missing an explicit account of the criteria of reason (and rational problem-solving) that she implicitly relies on.

[9] For a differentiated account, see McCarthy (2009). See also Forst (2019).

[10] On this, see Saar (2007).

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