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Edited by Giovanna Luciano
and Armando Manchisi

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Critique: Hegel and Contemporary Critical Theory

v *Hegel and Contemporary Critical Theory. An Introduction*
Giovanna Luciano and Armando Manchisi

Essays

1 *On the Contemporaneity of Critical Theory*
Gunnar Hindrichs

17 *Our Time Comprehended in Thoughts – Hegel, Humanity, and Social Critique*
Heikki Ikäheimo

39 *Romances of Nature. Hegelian and Romantic Impulses for Critical Theory*
Federica Gregoratto

63 *The Process Between Kant and Schlegel. Dialectic in the Adorno-Benjamin Debate*
Giovanni Zanotti

- 83 *Um desdobrar não tão silencioso: Algumas observações feministas sobre o § 166 da Filosofia do direito e a noção de modernidade de Hegel*
Marloren Lopes Miranda
- 103 *‘Was wir so wissen, weiß das Gewöhnliche Bewußtsein nicht...’: Zum Motiv der Bewusstlosigkeit in Hegels Philosophie des Rechts*
Markus Gante
- 131 *Simone de Beauvoir’s Critical Hegelianism*
Eliza Starbuck Little
- 149 *Max Horkheimer y el proyecto de una dialéctica no cerrada*
Paula García Cherep
- 173 *Anerkennung e teoria critica dell’intersoggettività*
Giovanni Andreozzi
- 205 *Reconstructive Social Criticism without a Genealogical Proviso: Honneth on Method and the Pathologies of Individual Freedom*
Antonio Ianni Segatto and Matheus Garcia de Moura
- 221 *The Becoming of Spirit. A Controversy on Social Change in Contemporary Critical Theory*
Agustín Lucas Prestifilippo

Report

- 247 *Begriff/begreifen, Schluss/schliessen, Idee/ideell. Usi lessicali e problemi di traduzione della Scienza della logica*
Federico Orsini, Armando Manchisi, and Paolo Giuspoli

Book Reviews

- 267 L. Filieri, *Sintesi e giudizio. Studio su Kant e Jakob Sigismund Beck*
(Emanuele Cafagna)
- 274 F. Pitillo, *La meraviglia del barbaro. L'intelletto negli scritti jenesi di Hegel (1801-1805)*
(Claudia Melica)
- 280 F. Nobili, *La prospettiva del tempo. L'idealismo fenomenologico di Husserl come autoesplicitazione della soggettività trascendentale*
(Iacopo Chiaravalli)
- 288 A. Bertinetto, *Estetica dell'improvvisazione*
(Enrico Milani)
- 295 R. Pozzo, *History of Philosophy and the Reflective Society*
(Giulia La Rocca)

ESSAYS

ON THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF CRITICAL THEORY

by Gunnar Hindrichs*

I.

When talking about Critical Theory, we must define what it is we are referring to. Nowadays the term applies to a bunch of approaches, which often do not have much more in common than a critical attitude towards our social reality, or our ideological situation, extending from conventional Analytical Philosophy in the service of conceptual engineering up to the helter-skelter of cultural studies¹.

It is not my ambition here to criticize these approaches. I simply want to point out that I will use the term ‘Critical Theory’ differently, referring exclusively to the form of thought that first coined the concept. As we all know, Max Horkheimer introduced the term ‘Critical Theory’ in his search for a new kind of Marxist reflection free from the self-obstructions in which the Marxisms of the Thirties were so deeply ensnared. Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Pollock, Löwenthal, and, for a certain time and to a certain degree also Erich Fromm, explored the possibilities of this way of thought from different angles. When talking about Critical Theory, I am referring to their philosophical project.

* Universität Basel

This contribution reproduces the text presented at the conference *Critiques of Reason: Hegel and Contemporary Critical Theory*, held at the University of Padova from June 29 to July 1, 2022, and organized by *hegelpd*, the Australian Hegel Society and the Sociedade Hegel Brasileira.

¹ A prominent example of the former is S. Haslanger, *Critical Theory and Practice*, Amsterdam, van Gorcum, 2017. The joy of Critical Theorists about the attention that they get here on the part of analytical school philosophy is amusing to observe.

This, however, seems to turn the following considerations into a study in the history of philosophy – or, worse, in the history of ideas. The consideration of the contemporaneity of Critical Theory appears thus to be missed. But the notion of contemporaneity is tricky. Not to be confused with synchrony, it refers to the companionship of thought and action with the inner meaning of a certain historical period. From this point of view, present forms of thinking can be accidental to our time because they reside in the periphery of its meaning, while older forms may very well get at its substantial nucleus and, accordingly, be contemporary.

To be sure, such a perspective rests on the assumption that we can distinguish the inner kernel of a historical period from its phenomenal surface; or, employing the philosophical nomenclature that I have just used, that we can differentiate between historical *substance* and its *accidents*. As is well known, many thinkers are careful to avoid this distinction, condemning it as a cast-iron Marxist or Hegelian approach that has lost its power of persuasion in the age of flexible capitalism. To give just one widely-read example: when Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in their diagnosis of the global empire, distinguish between the ‘mole’ and the ‘snake’ – the former being the traditional Hegelian-Marxist metaphor of a historical tendency beneath the surface of modern times, the latter being the up-to-date metaphor of a multitude undulating over the global plane without subterranean passageways –, they plainly dismiss the distinction between historical substance and accident, or nucleus and periphery². This, however, was some twenty years ago. In the meanwhile, the ‘empire’ and the ‘multitude’ of globalization have had to make room for our present-day postcolonial imperialism; the ideological concomitants that occupied our minds at the turn of the millennium have themselves lost their persuasiveness – not to mention the conceptual obscurity they possessed *ab initio*. Hence, we are justified, for the moment, in abiding by the distinction between substance and accident.

If we do so, contemporary Critical Theory must not be confused with synchronous Critical Theory. This might become

² M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 54-59.

important when we consider the predicament in which Critical Theory is entangled today. It seems to me that most Critical Theory of the present time – unintentionally – falls apart into its two components: critique on the one hand, theory on the other. I mean the following: in the field of Critical Theory today, there are theories, say, the theory of communicative action or the theory of recognition, and there are critiques, say, the critique of power or the critique of life forms³. But there is no Critical Theory in the literal, oxymoronic sense that is conveyed by its concept, viz., a theory that *itself is* critique, and a critique that *itself is* theory. To make the literal sense clearer, we must call to mind Kant's distinction between «critique» and «system»⁴. While the latter is the proper form of theory, the former is the propaedeutic to the proper form of theory. By this distinction, Kant explicates the *distinct functions* of theory and critique. We can call the first function a structure of knowledge, and the second function judgment's outer courtyard. In contrast, Horkheimer's model of a critical theory fuses these functions: Critical Theory is at once epistemic and juridical, meaning it passes judgment by its insight and provides insight by passing judgement.

I cannot go into the scope of this coalescence here⁵. But I want to point out that the fusion concept of Critical Theory stands in strict contradiction to most of its present forms. As mentioned, these forms are theories or critiques, but not critical theories in the literary sense. This means that synchronous Critical Theory is very different from what was once dubbed so, not only in detail or in certain amendments and transformations, but in principle, and it means further that the older Critical Theory might still be contemporary if its coalescent character hits the substance of our historical period.

³ J. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1984-1987; A. Honneth, *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*, Oxford, Polity Press, 2012; R. Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2018.

⁴ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge (Mass.), Cambridge University Press, 1998, A841/B869, p. 696.

⁵ For further considerations, see the chapter *Kritik – Theorie – Krise*, in my *Zur kritischen Theorie*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2020, pp. 12-45.

All this makes clear that the contemporaneity of Critical Theory is a problem in its own. In order to get to the heart of the matter, I suggest considering what Horkheimer's and Adorno's account of Critical Theory implies about the notion of contemporaneity. This, of course, cannot be the entire answer to the problem, for the explanation provided by a philosophical position about itself is rarely the full account. But it can help us avoid extrinsic points of views that, in the end, lead to hermeneutical injustice. So, let us reflect upon Critical Theory's contemporaneity as it is framed by itself.

II.

In order to do so, we have to begin with Hegel. One of his most famous statements says, «Philosophy is its time comprehended in thought»⁶. This is a proposition on the contemporaneity of philosophy, and, as we will see later, Critical Theory varies it radically. Two aspects of this statement warrant our attention. First, the statement makes clear that philosophy must be taken neither as a spirit hovering over the face of the waters, nor as an ahistorical conceptual construction, nor as *philosophia perennis*, which continuously works through the same questions of mind from the world's beginning on. Instead, philosophy pursues its labor at a certain point in time and possesses a historical nucleus: its content is just its time as comprehended in thought.

Second, the statement underlines that we must not confuse this historical nucleus with the subsumption of philosophy under certain historical conditions. Philosophy is neither the expression of its time, nor is it the function of historical circumstances, nor is it the mirror of a historical basis. All of this is excluded because, as *comprehension* of its time in thought, philosophy cannot be subjected

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge (Mass.), Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 21. On some systematic issues of this statement, see R. Bubner, *Philosophy Is Its Time Comprehended in Thought*, in Id., *Essays in Hermeneutics and Critical Theory*, New York (NY), Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 37-61.

to the order of history, but, on the contrary, subjects the order of history to its own conceptual labor. In this respect, philosophy transcends its historical situation – not in the ontological sense of transgressing it by becoming *something different from* its time, but in the logical sense of *dealing differently with* its time than approaches that are temporally constrained.

Now, these two aspects seem to make Hegel's proposition contradictory. How can philosophy possess a historical nucleus and at the same time transcend its historical situation? A solution becomes visible if we consider the *content* of philosophy a bit further. At first glance, one could think that it might help to distinguish between the historically immanent content of philosophy and its systematically transcendent form. However, this distinction does not work, because all differentiation between form and content is connected to the subject-object-relation and, as the *Phenomenology of Spirit* argues, thus falls short of the claims of knowledge. Therefore, if the two aspects of Hegel's proposition are to be reasonable, they must be united in content itself. This means that philosophical thought must possess a content which both inheres in and transcends its time. Is there such content?

A promising aspirant is totality. Indeed, the concept of totality must be considered anyway because of its connection to the concept of truth, and philosophical thought aspires to grasp the true. Hegel articulates the connection of truth and totality in another famous statement, «the true is the whole», the justification of which cannot be discussed here, but must simply be presupposed. If we accept it for the sake of our argument, we must say that philosophical thought is meant to grasp the whole, which is to say that philosophical thought is meant to grasp totality. Accordingly, Hegel's statement «Philosophy is its time comprehended in thought» can be rendered as 'Philosophy is its time comprehended under the species of totality' – and now, the two aspects of the proposition are consistent. The reason is the following.

Take totality in its strict sense. It excludes externality, for externality implies that there can be something extra to totality, which is self-contradictory. However, if totality excludes externality, it excludes relations to something else than itself, and this means that totality in the strict sense is the absolute. The absolute, in turn, is

unconditional, so that the comprehension of one's time under the species of totality amounts to the comprehension of one's time under the species of the unconditional. Now, if «Philosophy is its time comprehended in thought» amounts to 'Philosophy is its time comprehended under the species of totality', and if totality amounts to the unconditional, Hegel's proposition of the contemporaneity of philosophy holds that philosophy possesses a temporal content that is unconditional and, therefore, transcends all temporal conditions, and the two aspects that seemed contradictory, viz., historical nucleus and transcendence of time, hold together.

Let us sum up the implications for the contemporaneity of philosophy. Hegel's proposition entails, on the one hand, that time as comprehended in thought is the time in which we think, with all its conditions and possibilities, and no philosophy can evade from this time: «everyone is a son of his time», says Hegel⁷. On the other hand, time as comprehended in thought is the time, not *in* which we think, but *which* we think. It is a historical unit or epoch that is conceptualized under the species of totality, and by this, in conceptualizing time as historical units under the species of totality, philosophical thought indeed substantializes its contemporaneity in transcending its historical conditions.

Now, the transcendence of philosophical thought cannot mean that philosophy goes beyond time. If it went beyond time, then the whole that it grasps as the true would not be the whole but just a part, the eternal part if you want, in contrast to another part, the temporal part. It follows that philosophical thought must attempt at encountering historical transcendence *within* historical immanence. When we call the latter 'contingency' and the former 'absoluteness', we can reformulate this requirement in saying that philosophical thought must attempt at *encountering absoluteness in contingency* – or to speak in Hegel's own words: «What matters is to recognize in the semblance of the temporal and the transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present»⁸. This is, of course, an allusion to the theological concept of God's

⁷ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 15.

⁸ Ivi, p. 20.

incarnation⁹. According to it, the semblance of the temporal and the transient – or indeed, the semblance of the human and the mortal – is the very place where the absolute, where God resides, and without such an incarnation in time, God would not be God, but a detached and thus only relative idol. Hegel's proposition transposes this theological structure into philosophical terms. It models, then, the structure of a substance which is immanent to the historical chain of accidents. Accordingly, the proposition «Philosophy is its time comprehended in thought» means that philosophy identifies the absolute within contingency, by distinguishing between historical substance and historical accident, and if it fails to do so, it fails to do its job, namely to grasp the things under the species of truth, which is to grasp them under the species of totality.

This leads us to a last point. Identifying the absolute within contingency, or recognizing the substance of historical accidents, means to pinpoint the rational within what's going on in one's time. This means nothing less than understanding history as an actualization of reason. Hegel thus claims, «What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational»¹⁰. This equation of the rational and the actual builds the structural heart of Hegel's account of philosophical contemporaneity. If the actual and rational were not the same, history would not be the actualization of reason and, accordingly, no substance would be immanent to the temporal and the transient, that is, philosophy could not be its time comprehended under the species of totality. Therefore, the contemporaneity of philosophy depends on the equation of the actual and rational.

III.

This equation, however, soon became doubtful. I am not alluding here to the blows dealt to Hegel's philosophy by the

⁹ See F. Rosenzweig, *Hegel und der Staat*, Bd. 2, München, Oldenbourg, 1920, especially pp. 176-182; and M. Theunissen, *Die Verwirklichung der Vernunft. Zur Theorie-Praxis-Diskussion im Anschluß an Hegel*, Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 1970, pp. 85-89.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 20.

positivism, the historicism, or the early existentialism of the 19th Century; usually, they did not *argue* against the equation of the actual and the rational, but simply dismissed it as nonsense. I mean, instead, its immanent, argumentative critique as brought forward by the Young Hegelians. Notice that Hegel's equation of the rational and the actual considered the actual only up to the moment of its philosophical comprehension. Accordingly, philosophical comprehension works in retrospect, and «the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk»¹¹. The Young Hegelians, however, conversed this retrospective stance into a prospective stance – for which they introduced a new metaphor in the end, viz., Heinrich Heine's and Karl Marx's picture of the Gallic Cock crowing at the dawn of a new era¹². It undermined the equation of the actual and the rational.

The argument is the following. As we saw, Hegel's identification of the actual and the rational is meant to comprehend history under the species of totality. But in actuality, it restricts the historical process to the past and present, while true historical totality comprises all three historical dimensions, viz., past, present, and future. Polish count August von Cieszkowski, who, as so many Slavic thinkers, was influenced by Hegel, put this in clear terms. He wrote: «The totality of history must [...] consist of the present, the past, and the future, of the way that already has been undergone and the way that is yet to be undergone, and from this, it follows as the first postulate, to vindicate the cognition of the essence of the future for speculation»¹³. On these lines, the identification of the actual and rational must be radically altered. The future must be considered rational, too, meaning that the very dimension that will put an end to the present actuality of reason actualizes reason no less than its actualization in our times does. Indeed, one might very well say that each approaching age must be *more rational* than the one it supersedes, because it sublates the present and thus its

¹¹ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 23.

¹² On the literary background, see S.S. Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature*, London, Verso, 2011², pp. 64-67.

¹³ A. von Cieszkowski, *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie*, Berlin, Veit & Company, 1838, p. 8.

rationality. The result is the crypto-eschatological idea that the true actualization of reason is yet to come, and as long as such true actualization is still in the advent, all reason in history remains provisional and tentative. From this point of view, the actual has to *become* rational, and the rational has to *become* actual. It is remarkable that Hegel himself seems to have used this phrase, as student notes edited in the 1980s suggest; but he did so only in his unpublished lectures, whereas the Young Hegelians, or at least the more significant amongst them, put it at the center of their thought.

The result is, first, that the totality of reason is incomplete in the present, and second, that because of its incompleteness, our age is deficient. The awareness of this deficiency accounts for the *critical* quality of Young Hegelian thought, critical both in subjective and objective respect. The subjective respect consists in the compulsion of the subject to criticize the deficient present age under the species of the unfinished historical totality; the objective respect consists in the certainty that the present age will be judged objectively doomed in history's 'court of law'. Obviously, the former finds its grounding in the latter, while the latter finds its drive belt (driving force?) in the former, so that subjective and objective critique of one's time are just two sides of the same coin. Betting this coin is the mark of Young Hegelian contemporaneity.

This step in the direction of Karl Marx is small, but radically changes the picture. Marx's position draws an important conclusion from the Young Hegelian argument, relating it to a certain historical structure and thereby overcoming their limitation to theory, or, as he calls it, to the mere interpretation of the world. The main point is that Marx recognizes that the reconciliation of the rational and the actual can no longer be the task of philosophy when turning to face the future like the Young Hegelians did; for while past and present are objects of philosophical cognition, the future is not. Instead, that which is yet to be is deemed the responsibility of the *makers* of history, so that philosophical augury about the future course of world history has to give way to human action, motivated by the rational deficiency of the present. It follows that, if we accord history all its three dimensions, we have to transgress theory by letting it lead us into the realm of political praxis – into

a praxis, more precisely, that completes the totality of the rational and the actual in the future, and knows itself to be the actualization of reason.

Moses Hess called the theory of this praxis «Philosophy of the Act»¹⁴. Others agreed with him, and Marx joined their camp, but he also criticized the unqualified concept of praxis which they fostered. One has to be more precise about it, he argued; the only kind of praxis that can sublimate the present age is revolutionary praxis. Revolutionary praxis would be the praxis of the revolutionary part of the present age, and as we know from the *Communist Manifesto*, the revolutionary part must be a revolutionary class. In other words, the praxis required for the reconciliation of the rational and the actual must be proletarian praxis.

It is obvious that, by this argument, the critical option of the Young Hegelian is transformed into a *revolutionary* option, which is itself characterized as *proletarian* option. Marx therefore claimed, «Philosophy cannot actualize itself without the sublation of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot sublimate itself without the actualization of philosophy»¹⁵. This sentence marries the Hegelian concept of contemporaneity with and that of the Young Hegelians. It conveys the Marxist notion of contemporaneity, which consists in the actualization of reason, but equally expresses that, since the actualization of reason is to be accomplished in the historical dimension of future, it must be carried out by the present revolutionary class, whose praxis sublimes the present age, its philosophy, and the class itself. Thus, from the Marxist point of view, philosophical contemporaneity consists essentially in partisanship with this class – not because of tender illusions about the wretched of the earth, but because of insight into the actualization of reason to which philosophy aspires.

¹⁴ M. Hess, *Philosophy of the Act*, in *Socialist Thought: A Documentary History*, ed. by A. Fried and R. Sanders, New York (NY), Garden City, 1964, pp. 249-275. This has a theological background; see W. Beckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory. Detroning the Self*, Cambridge (Mass.), Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 192-195.

¹⁵ K. Marx, *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, Bd. 1, Berlin, Dietz, 1968, pp. 378-391, p. 391. My translation.

We can say, then, that the proletarian praxis has become the historical substance of the present that Hegel had in mind. This is, of course, a *contradictio in adjecto*, for a praxis cannot be a substance, lest we confuse ontology and the theory of action. Marx himself did not, as the 11th Feuerbach Thesis shows, and for the sake of hermeneutic sincerity, we should follow him in this. Nonetheless, it cannot be disputed that the Hegelian, and Young Hegelian, idea of a historical substance immanent to transient contingency is now embodied by the revolutionary praxis of the proletariat. Notice that this does not mean that the *proletariat itself* is the substance. Indeed, it is not and can never be, because historical substance consists in the actualization of reason, and a class is as little the actualization of reason as class society is, of which it is a function. Rather, the praxis of actualizing reason is the Marxist substance of society, and only in performing such praxis does the proletariat gain substantial weight in history.

After all, the concept of contemporaneity has undergone a decisive shift, from comprehending one's time in thought to changing one's time in revolutionary praxis. The famous picture of the crowing Gallic cock illustrates this: looking back on past and present gives rise to the wake-up call for the actualization of reason. Everything now depends on proletarian praxis, however, and when this praxis is blocked, not just arbitrarily, but necessarily, then the actualization of reason is postponed *ad calendas Graecas*. What follows for the contemporaneity of philosophy, then?

IV.

We all know that Critical Theory arose in the late Thirties from the experience that proletarian praxis had become everything but revolutionary. To many partisans, it seemed that the route taken by Bolsheviks since at least what Trotsky, in 1935, called «the Soviet Thermidor»¹⁶ was wrong; equally, it seemed to them that the endeavors of the organizations of the proletariat in the capitalist

¹⁶ L. Trotsky, *The Workers' State, Thermidor and Bonapartism*, in Id., *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1934-35)*, New York-London, Pathfinder, 1971, pp. 240-261, p. 249.

countries had led to appeasement and adaptation. Proletarian praxis did not appear to actualize reason but unreason to the extent of dumbness, boredom, and cruelty. Those who still cherished Marxist visions were forced to come to terms with this situation. Some resorted to the problem of class consciousness, some to the problem of hegemony, and some eventually gave birth to the idea of a Marxism without revolution. They dubbed the child 'Critical Theory'. Or so the story goes.

It is clear that this story neutralizes its object. According to it, Critical Theory is the off-spring of leftist melancholy, and it can be viewed within the framework of cultural and intellectual history or, worse, in the shrine of memorial kitsch of present-day pinkoes. Be this as it may, it is our task to enquire about the conceptual underpinnings of the matter. Is there a central point of view which determines the Critical Theory's way of thought?

In my eyes, the central point of view is the problem of immanence. Recall that Hegel theorized a substance which is immanent to the semblance of historical accidents. In his formula, the transcendence of the absolute takes on the shape of immanent contingency. Something similar can be seen in the Marxist transformation of Hegel's model. On the one hand, the transformation strengthens the aspect of transcendence, because it claims that the immanence of the present has to be broken up towards a future which is to surpass it. On the other hand, however, such transcendence takes place within the continuum of history, and the revolutionary rupture of the continuum remains itself an immanent event of this continuum. If we connect this ambivalence with Marx's idea that history so far has merely been the pre-history of human society, and that only with the revolutionary praxis of the proletariat will humanity begin making its true history¹⁷, we can reformulate the predicament that human history will remain human prehistory as long as there is no clear-cut account of transcending the historical continuum. Evidently, some version of eschatology would serve the task, but this would fall prey of the critique of religion as human self-alienation, which is, according to his own

¹⁷ K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Moscow, Progress, 1977, p. 22.

words, the premise of Marx's turn towards proletarian praxis¹⁸. We must conclude, then, that the Hegel-Marxist line of thought does not offer a good way out of historical immanence and, however unwillingly, constructs an infinite human pre-history.

I consider this analysis to be the true heart of Critical Theory¹⁹. Its conclusion can be strengthened if we take the argument of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* into account. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* implies the structure that I just spelled out but refers it to an analysis of emancipatory reason. Enlightenment is reason as a means of liberation; its dialectic consists in a liberation which erects a new iron cage in which we are imprisoned. This dialectic is grounded in reason's drive for immanence, for the enlightened world view does not accept anything that does not submit to its rational procedures, and cuts everything off that transcends these procedures. The rational methods are thus the conceptual bars of the new iron cage, the immanence of which can be transgressed but for the price of falling short of the standards of reason.

If we connect this argument to the philosophy of history, we can easily see that the historical progress of actualizing reason cements the immanence of the cage of reason. Therefore, actualizing reason is a regress rather than a progress, at least when we abide by the idea that progress is essentially connected with freedom. On the other hand, dismissing the actualization of reason would involve no less of a regress, because enlightenment is the only way to get out of mythological power structures which form iron cages, cages, albeit, ornamented by the flowers of imagination. It follows that there is nothing 'out there', no beyond, and that immanence is complete.

According to this diagnosis, the contemporaneity of philosophy must, once again, be radically recast. Philosophy claims to be the pursuit of reason and is thus deeply entangled in the dialectic of enlightenment; if it reflects upon it, it recognizes itself as a prisoner of the cage of immanence. Hence, contemporary philosophy

¹⁸ Id., *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, p. 378.

¹⁹ See my *Zur kritischen Theorie*.

has to work against its own procedures, without being able to get rid of them. From the perspective of Critical Theory, the contemporaneity of philosophy consists in its self-conscious self-contradiction.

This structure is indicated by its very name. Recalling the oxymoronic nature of the title 'Critical Theory', we can now reformulate it. Critical Theory is critical because it proceeds in judgements about the present, and it is a theory because there is no alternative to the consummation of reason, which is theory. At the same time, critique is at most the propaedeutic to a future theory, so that a Critical Theory claims to be both a theory and not a theory. We can now see that this oxymoronic structure is meant to disrupt and unsettle the immanence of reason. Keep in mind that the oxymoron is a way of conveying something that counts, according to the standards of sense, as meaningful nonsense. Wittgenstein famously said that, whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent, and the requirements for that of which one can speak are the requirements of meaningful formulation²⁰. Here, the iron cage of immanence becomes obvious: it is erected by the bounds of sense and meaning. Critical Theory, in contrast, wants «to say what cannot be said», to quote Adorno²¹. It confesses such transgression by its very name, a name that, if taken literally, is nonsensical, though it contains, as do all oxymora, a sense internal to its nonsense; «Though this be madness, yet there is method in't». The oxymoron of Critical Theory indicates a transcendence which persists in spite of the cage of immanence.

The contemporaneity of Critical Theory, then, is two-faced. One face consists in the constant analysis of the immanence of our thinking and doing, that is, in the constant analysis of their contribution to domination at our time. The other face consists in the permanent revolution of our thinking and doing, which also includes Critical Theory's own thinking and doing. By both, Critical Theory rescues the idea of a dis-continuum within the continuum

²⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, London-New York, Routledge, 1974, p. 89.

²¹ T.W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, Cambridge-Malden, Polity, 2008, p. 74.

of infinite human prehistory. Being contemporary means thus to swim against its current without a salvaging bank in sight.

V.

In the beginning of my paper, I alluded to the possibility that the older version of Critical Theory can still be contemporary, and I used the Hegelian-Marxist distinction between historical substance and accident in order to distinguish between contemporaneity and synchrony.

We now have seen that the older version of Critical Theory recast this distinction radically. From its point of view, considering history under the species of totality, or under the species of the substance which is immanent to the temporal and transient, is still the key to understand what is going on; but it means to reflect it as incarcerated in the iron cage of the dialectic of enlightenment. Accordingly, Hegel's claim that the true is the whole, which provided the account of truth for his history of philosophy, was turned in its opposite by Adorno's aperçu that the whole is the untrue. Recognizing historical substance within the semblance of contingency means, then, to recognize the falsehood of human history, or, in other words, it means to recognize human history as human prehistory. It follows for Critical Theory that, when we take its account of contemporaneity for serious, its own contemporaneity holds if we can make sense of this prehistorical point of view. Can we?

It appears to me that immanence is, indeed, one of the decisive determinants of our time. One often wonders about the fact that, while oppression and misery are so explicit, the struggles against them are continuously ceasing. There is certainly a cluster of reasons for this, extending from the individualization of inequity to the prevalence of the concept of justice, but the most important reason for this seems to me to be the fact that people cannot, or dare not, earnestly imagine that a fundamentally different society is possible. If there is some truth to this impression, then the web of immanence is indeed framing our society. But then, the prehistorical point of view makes sense, today, and grasps the substance of

the transient. Accordingly, the contemporaneity of Critical Theory could consist in the factor that it brings the immanence of human prehistory to our mind. This may not be the last word to be said, but it could be the first to be said before doing the next step.