

Critical Theory in the Twenty-First Century: The Logic of Capital between Classical Social Theory, the Early Frankfurt School Critique of Political Economy, and the Prospect of Artifice

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Introduction

There are many different versions of critical theory, both within the tradition of the Frankfurt School which inaugurated the idea and the concept of “critical theory”, and beyond the latter in the sense of feminist, poststructuralist, postmodernist, postcolonial and queer critical theories, to name the most prominent incarnations. Still, despite the variety of critical theories, at their core, there is synchronicity with the type of critique the Frankfurt School theorists first developed and refined, as they drew on the works of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Max Weber and other social theorists and philosophers. Yet, this core, as delineated in Max Horkheimer’s programmatic essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory” ([1937] 1972), eight decades ago in terms of a radical philosophy of social science, ever is in danger of being pushed to the side. Though widely recognized in its importance, in the interest of more immediate causes that are also consistent with the impetus of critical theory, such as agendas driven by concrete goals like emancipation, liberation, social justice, or the elimination of suffering, or by practical concerns, including forms of *praxis* directed at revolutionary (or, at the very least, qualitative) social transformation, or strategies that fall under the rubric of politics, the core of critical theory frequently has been put second, or entirely ignored.¹

Yet, did (and does) such a core exist? If critical theory in fact did – or was supposed to – have a discernible core that applies to the tradition and should define the latter, and which must be viewed as sacrosanct, as it were, it should be possible to demarcate it clearly. Despite countless attempts to construct, update, or reconstruct critical theory, and to formulate related working definitions (e.g., Geuss, 1981; Habermas, [1981] 1984, 1987; Honneth [1985] 1991), one key dimension of the programmatic core of critical theory, as promised during the early phase of the Frankfurt School, and put forth strongly by Horkheimer ([1937] 1972), has been unduly overlooked, or willfully ignored. In short, this neglected dimension concerns the rigorous (and no less radical) examination of *the gravity concrete and specific socio-historical conditions and circumstances exert on endeavors in the human sciences, to illuminate the vicissitudes of successive societal configurations in the modern age*. Once recognized and identified explicitly, implications result from this core concern, in no uncertain terms, for the tradition’s approach to scrutinizing – *critically*, to be sure – the evolving logic of the dynamic capitalist economy at the national and global levels. How and in what way did the early Frankfurt School identify and deploy this program, if at all? Assuming that the tradition’s programmatic core concern indeed is both unique and important, it is conceivable that it never again has been laid out as clearly, and that, as

a result, subsequent proponents of critical theory have been laboring to explicate what may well be *most* important about the tradition and its contributions to illuminating the conditions of social life in the modern age, without being in the position to acknowledge the core explicitly, spell out its import rigorously, and advocate and apply it effectively. Concordantly, the potentially pernicious influence the economy exerts in and on human civilization, in recent decades and especially at the current historical juncture, is likely not to have received the necessary attention. How capitalism, and especially the *logic of capital* (Dahms, 2015, 2015a) increasingly may be inversely related to the possibility of qualitative social progress, and detrimental to sustaining the idea of the pursuit of the common good, also likely would have been neglected.

Along the lines of a research institute designed to rely on and integrate all the human sciences – the humanities as well as the social sciences – Horkheimer ([1931] 1993) a few years earlier had initially suggested and then established an overall division of labor to be implemented and pursued at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. The members of the Institute were engaged in the critique of capitalism on three levels. On the first level, they endeavored to revitalize Marx’s critique of political economy, to be applied to the later stage of capitalist development reached during the first decades of the twentieth century. Acknowledging the persistent and intensifying division of labor in the social sciences, Horkheimer determined that – on the second level – the members and affiliates of the Institute would be responsible for specific dimensions of modern social reality, e.g., for sociology, psychology, economics, or law. Since each individual social science is concerned with a specific analytical and theoretical agenda and set of phenomena, critical theorists started out from the assumption of the relative autonomy (‘inner logic’) of the social sciences’ respective tasks in relation to the diverse dimensions of social life (‘social value spheres’) that are the domain of these disciplines (see Dahms, 1997, 1999). The goal was to critically evaluate the relative importance of different inner logics, respectively, in light of prevailing patterns determining how exactly industrialized capitalist societies fulfill an array of functions. In this context, Friedrich Pollock was responsible for providing an updated diagnosis of political economy along Marxian lines, while it fell to the community of scholars at the Institute, on the third level, to generate a highly sophisticated, systematic critique of post-liberal capitalism and its effects on political, social and cultural dimensions of life. As we will see, however, Pollock did not meet this challenge, but provided an analysis that derailed the Frankfurt School’s commitment to continue Marx’s critique of political economy *at the same level of rigor and intensity*.

Since its inception in New York in the mid-1930s, Frankfurt School critical theory has gone through a number of permutations. Though the tradition’s origins commonly and correctly have been situated in Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s, strictly speaking, the concept of critical theory was formulated in the United States by Horkheimer.² It is doubtful that – at least far from certain whether – absent the need to emigrate from Germany after Hitler’s rise to power, the concept would have been formulated explicitly at all (Dahms, 2016). At the very least, there would have been much less of an incentive to develop as radically different a perspective on the social sciences as spelled out in Horkheimer’s distinction between traditional and critical theory, if the National Socialist take-over would not have occurred, and there would not have been an imminent need for the members of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt to leave Germany.

The agenda of critical theory was at play even before the concept, “critical theory,” was formulated by Max Horkheimer, and seconded by Herbert Marcuse ([1937] 2009), in New York. Especially Horkheimer from early on had been concerned with the implications resulting from

social change in early twentieth-century modern capitalist societies, for the tools we employ in the interest of grasping the nature and direction of change. As a philosopher with a strong interest in sociology, Horkheimer understood that the key concepts employed in the social sciences and the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the humanities) to meaningfully assess and interpret the human condition at the individual and the collective level under conditions of continuous industrialization were not merely means to reflect on the nature of social change in the modern age, but also reflections and expressions of the nature of social change (see Abromeit, 2011).

Critical Theory in the Twentieth Century: Modern Society and the Socio-Logic of Capital

Despite the many different conceptualizations and definitions of critical theory that have been formulated and advocated over the course of the last half-century or so, since related debates and conflicts have accompanied efforts to advance rigorously critical analyses of modern society as a whole, or specific dimensions of the latter, there has been a single overarching concern that has distinguished Frankfurt School critical theory from other types. This theme pertains to the manner in which the spread and deepening of economics in its capitalist form has been permeating non-economic modes of life in the modern world, with regard to politics, culture, and society, with discernible consequences at the levels of individual psychology and collective social psychology. Indeed, critical theory may well be understood as an explicitly stated and determined response to ongoing transformations and modulations in and across modern societies producing both latent and manifest catastrophes that cannot be grasped, nor explained adequately at the levels at which those catastrophes are discernible. Rather, especially the early critical theorists of the Frankfurt School observed and interpreted social, political, and cultural catastrophes as symptoms of an underlying economic logic of which concrete social forms are expressions to such an extent that their illumination and analysis require an understanding of causality that was novel and unexpected at the time.

Especially in the mainstream social sciences and humanities, there was and continues to be to this day a notable lack of recognition that such a causality is in force, even though it had been foreshadowed both by the classics of social theory, especially Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, and even by developments in theoretical physics, in terms of quantum mechanics and relativity theory – developments that coincided with the establishment of sociology as a social science during the 1890s and early twentieth century (see Dahms, in preparation).

Put simply, modern society is sustained by a nexus of interconnected social, economic, political and cultural processes which are mutually reinforcing and sustaining, and being energized and maintained by the sum total of focused activities of a sufficiently large segment of the population whose members are willing or determined to accumulate ever more personal wealth. These processes mediate between different logics that are not as such compatible with each other but which, in modern society *qua* capitalism – and *only* in this socio-economic system – are being forced onto the same “wave-length”, as it were, in order to ensure the stability of social order as materialized in form of a particular system of social and economic structures. Yet the actors that are driven by the impulse to expand their wealth are neither responsible for the peculiar causality that is sustaining modern society, nor are they in control of it. Instead, they endeavor, more or less successfully, to tune into what appears to be the economic logic without which modern society neither could have come into existence, nor be able to maintain itself, nor expand its mode of control, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to ever greater numbers of individuals, to more and more countries and regions of the world, and to the Earth’s biosphere.

This economic logic is the *logic of capital*. Yet, paradoxically, what appears as an economic logic in fact is a social logic, the *socio-logic of capital* that is being maintained and mediated through processes whose sway and workings we are amply familiar with: alienation, anomie, and the Protestant ethic (see Dux, 2008; Dahms, 2007; in preparation).

In order to appreciate the specific nature of this logic, and the specific kind of causality that it engendered, which it continues to promulgate as well as rely upon, and which is eminently incompatible with everyday life assumptions and what frequently has been referred to as “common sense”, it is necessary to understand, first, the economic logic of capital. To illuminate the latter as it began to reconstruct the human species and, along with it, inevitably, the relationship between society and nature during the nineteenth century, was the achievement of Marx’s critique of political economy. However, it was neither by accident, nor as a distraction from focus on the economic logic of capital, that sociology as the social science of *modern* society began to take shape alongside Marx’s efforts. As it was concerned with the social forms that enable individuals as members of modern society to construct meaningful life-histories, regardless of how *rational* or *irrational* the larger social context in fact may be – and depending on which definitions of rationality and irrationality are being employed or deployed – sociology emerged in response to indications that modern society is a highly counterintuitive system of phenomena.

Importantly, the operation of modern society neither can be gleaned from what is observed directly at the surface of social processes, institutions, and forms of organization, but requires a stance on the part of sociologists that recognizes the inevitability of more and more social forms being drawn into a kind of *maelstrom* which diminishes the number and strength of static social forms, and increases the number and strength of dynamic forms. As Marx put, “all that is solid melts into air”, although, sociologically speaking, it does *not* melt into air, but turn into matter that can be molded according to necessity, circumstance, and context, is exceedingly adaptable, and creates the appearance of social, political, and cultural forms remaining relatively stable, while the economic underground is in perpetual turmoil. Yet, the non-economic forms are undergoing rapid transformations as well, even though individuals who struggle to make sense of their world and who try to pursue sensible and minimally predictable lives *perceive* the social world as being much more stable than it is. This condition triggers rapidly proliferating experiences of dissonance that appear to increase individuals’ determination to hold on to politics, culture and society as dimensions that provide a semblance of stability. Without this determination, which manifests and is expressed in myriad ways, modern society as capitalism presumably would not be able to prevail, and it is for this reason that it would not have been possible to explain the machinations of twentieth-century modern capitalist society solely, or even above all, with reference to Marx’s critique of political economy.

The members of the Institute for Social Research, and Max Horkheimer above all, recognized the importance of analyzing and explaining the inner workings of modern society adequately and accurately, beyond the scope of traditional theory and mainstream sociology. Transcending the limits of the latter is a necessary precondition for conceiving of strategies to bring about qualitative social change consistent with shared norms and values, which in turn must not be a function of the repressive regime of twentieth-century political economy, but they require a non-regressive foundation for laying the foundation for a more just society, a society in which the reconciliation of facts and norms would be conceivable in non-violent fashion.

Put differently, whereas diagnosing and scrutinizing modern capitalism as a system built around the promulgation of disembodied value is impossible without the contributions Marx

provided, it is highly likely that without a thorough and refined understanding of how the logic of capital is *mediated* in modern society through social, political and cultural forms – how modern capitalism rests and is contingent on the socio-logic of capital – as addressed and studied especially by Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, desirable and practically conceivable strategies for advancing qualitative social transformations are likely to be unattainable.³ Indeed, one of the many reasons why Marx’s vision of a better world may well have been perverted, betrayed, and abandoned is that Marx’s diagnostic tools on their own might not be a suitable basis for developing effective strategies to prepare and execute qualitative social change, in the absence of insights generated by a kind of critical sociology inspired by and capable of appreciating the critical impetus of Durkheim’s and Weber’s respective conceptualizations of the responsibility of sociologists to acknowledge and illuminate that peculiar causality alluded to earlier.

As a consequence, the challenge of illuminating change in modern society has three imminent implications. First, the meaning of guiding concepts is not static, but changes with changing conditions in modern society which, considering its accelerating pace of change, produces an ever greater need to be cognizant of this fact. Secondly, to grasp modern society accurately, it is necessary to assess the gravity concrete socio-historical circumstances exert on the process of illuminating modern society. Thirdly, if both the changing meaning of concepts and the gravity of socio-historical conditions are recognized sufficiently in their specificity, then both the concepts and the specific socio-historical conditions can serve as means to identify the nature and track the direction of socio-historical change in specific contexts.

All three challenges must be met in order to circumscribe the constitutional logic of modern society. If successful, this process constitutes a form of radical basic research. Identifying the constitutional logic of modern society is a necessary precondition for developing research agendas in the social sciences and humanities that relate constructively to the nature of their challenges, respectively (Dahms, 2016). The goal is for the social science and humanities disciplines to contribute to illuminating the constitutional logic further, rather than getting caught up in the machinations of modern society and ascribing significance and causality to factors and phenomena that are surface appearances, rather than in any way related to underlying forces. This approach is radical in the sense that it is committed to follow the logic of the challenge at hand, rather than framing the challenge itself in relation to the specificity of socio-historical conditions and their imperatives and preference with regard to how social-science challenges are to be postulated.

Since the beginning of critical theory, the significance of the three implications for how to position social research has been watered down further and further. In the first generation, it was most conspicuously present, partly due to their experience during the 1930 and 1940s, though not consistently across the different members of the Institute for Social Research. Today, we need a new focal point for criticizing the current condition – conceptually – by radicalizing the tradition that began with the critique of alienation in the early Marx, continued with his later critique of commodity fetishism, morphed into Lukács’s critique of reification, to be followed by Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason and Adorno’s critique of identity thinking (Wellmer, [1984] 2012). With Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action* ([1981] 1984, 1987) as a critique of functionalist reason, which implicitly presumed and codified the purported achievements of the postwar/Cold War era (and which, from today’s perspective, evidently are turning out not be of a reliably lasting nature; see Bailey, 2013 and Allen, 2016), the tradition began to take on a much more traditional (as opposed to rigorously critical) veneer, which to date

has culminated in Axel Honneth's recognition paradigm. My proposal for focusing critical theory's energies in our age, the twenty-first century, is the concept of *artifice*.⁴

Classical Social Theory and the Transition from *Spirit* to *Capital*

The classics of social theory, above all Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, were concerned with identifying and making accessible in rigorous fashion processes that violated established notions of causality in natural science, philosophy, and political economy (as the precursor of economics as a social science). A. R. Lacey has defined "causal principle" as follows:

Name for a variety of principles, such as that every event has a cause, that the same cause must have the same effect, or that the cause must have at least as much reality as the effect.

This last principle (somewhat akin to the principle of sufficient reason) usually says that what causes something to be of a certain sort must itself be of that sort to at least the same degree; for example, what makes something hot must itself be hot. This goes back to Aristotle's principle that actuality is prior to potentiality; that is, what is potentially so-and-so can only be made actually so by something that is itself actually so (Bothamley, 2002: 81).

What Marx, Durkheim and Weber discovered in different yet compatible and complementary ways, as a consequence of different guiding interests, and with different results, is that modern society relies on a set of processes that persistently mediate between a large-scale economic process (based on capital accumulation and industrialization) and social, political and cultural processes that range from the level of the individual to the level of the nation-state, from the minutest human experiences to the condition of humanity and global civilization. Undeniably, there is a link between how human beings economize and how society relates to nature. Today, this link is tangible in the most conspicuous ways, e.g., in the fact that between 1970 and 2010, the global population of vertebrate animals has decreased by 52%, whereas the global human population has doubled within the same time frame, from approximately 3.5 billion to approximately 7 billion people (see McLellan, Iyengar, Jeffries, and Oerlemans, 2014).

In broad strokes, and partly relying on the writings of Dieter Wolf, we may conceive of the formation of modern society as the transition during the seventeenth century, from *nature* to *spirit*, as traced and spelled out in Hegel's dialectical philosophy.⁵ According to Hegel's rendering of German idealism, the human condition until the end of the Middle Ages was a function of nature as the force to be reckoned with. How human beings organized their lives, individually and collectively, was a response to the fact that nature was beyond control. Even though humans for eons had made efforts to contain nature's potentially destructive power, success was limited. As a consequence of the Age of Enlightenment, however, the prospect of humans understanding the world they inhabit sufficiently well to for their mode of existence no longer to be, at least not at the same level of intensity, a function of nature, appeared on the horizon of the future. Relying on Kant's critiques as a necessary mode for relating to the world in enlightened fashion, i.e, for the first time somewhat *realistically*, as opposed to through religion, and in turn also critiquing the historically insensitive and limited purview of Kant's critiques, Hegel posited that human existence, if understood properly and deeply, should be a

function of “spirit” as the capacity to relate to reality at all levels, by means of the self-reflective intellect and the ability to reason.

However, as “spirit” started asserting itself alongside the formation of a novel type of society with dimensions both *civil* and *bourgeois* (see Dahms, 2006), it did so with the proverbial wings of republican politics entwined with the establishment of market economies. Both facilitated the process of industrialization, and took the form of what Marx analyzed and criticized along different lines as a social structure centered on the bourgeoisie as the newly ruling class. Modern society as bourgeois society continued to evolve in a manner that appeared to be conducive to what Hegel had identified as the civil dimension of modern society, as the corollary of its bourgeois dimension, yet the latter established itself at the expense of the former, and was conducive to transforming incipient market economies into economies based on the capitalist mode of production – *capitalism*.

Ergo, the promise for the future of human history that opened up with the shift in the human condition and its corresponding form of social organization – modern society – from society as a function of nature to a function of “spirit”, was warped when spirit took on the form of *capital*, as the first kind of “artificial intelligence” – a contorted and severely delimited and limited form of spirit, as Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 2002) laid out in terms of the critique of instrumental reason. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Dahms, 2000) and will illustrate in the next section, even though the critique of instrumental reason resulted from the early critical theorists’ reliance of Pollock’s highly flawed rendering of the critique of political economy, the impetus in the early Frankfurt School to illuminate the phenomenon I am referring to here as the “logic of capital” (though not the corresponding terminology, as “logic of capital” is a recent device) was strong enough to advance the cause of critical theory to the next level.

The Plight of the Early Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory of *Political Economy*

As far as the analysis of economic conditions, forms of economic organization, and economic processes in modern capitalist societies is concerned, ‘plight’ characterizes the early Frankfurt School and the project of critical theory at least in three regards. Plight applies *generally* to classical critical theorists’ lack of success during the 1930s and 1940s in deepening further the mode of analysis Marx had developed in his critique of political economy, with regard to subsequent incarnations of capitalism, at a comparable level of rigor and precision.⁶ Plight also applied, *in particular*, to the specific contribution made by the designated economist at the Institute for Social Research, Friedrich Pollock, who from the 1920s to the early 1940s focused to a greater extent on political rather than economic categories and dimensions of societal change. Finally, plight also applied in the sense of *pledge* or *promise*: even though the Frankfurt School never was entirely successful in explicating once and for all, and precisely, the pivotal purpose and distinguishing features of its diagnoses of the continuous reconfiguration of capitalism, among the human sciences, the tradition emerged as the determined effort (and concurrent commitment) to put forth a mode of analyzing and scrutinizing the link between the economy, on the hand, and politics, culture, and society, on the other, to discern and highlight the problematic character of their relationship, whose importance for human existence has been increasing since the beginning of the modern age.

Yet, pointing out the Frankfurt School’s plight with regard to economic analysis is not to suggest that the tradition’s achievements – especially the particular mode of reflexivity its representatives have been pursuing and advocating, as indispensable to both social theory and the

human sciences (see Geuss, 1981, Hazelrigg, 2009) – are any less remarkable and significant, particularly to the history of social and political thought. Nor does acknowledgment of plight, when viewed from today's vantage point, necessarily translate into the claim that the early Frankfurt School's analyses of capitalist economic issues, and especially its overall agenda, were without value. Rather, despite – and perhaps in part, *because* – of the nature of this plight, and the corresponding neglect of the critique of political economy, the main representatives of the first generation, above all Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Adorno, were able to develop a specific mode of analyzing and scrutinizing modern capitalism whose pertinence and acuity has continued to grow in subsequent decades (see Dahms, 2000). The classical critical theorists' concerns are especially relevant with regard to vexing aspects of the dynamic relationship between politics, economics, society and culture that a more sophisticated critique of political economy may have neglected. Still, by the latter part of the twentieth century, evidence had begun to mount for the need for critical theory to engage in rigorous and systematically focused analysis of political economy, a need that has turned into imminent urgency in the early twenty-first century, not least because of the acceleration of social change and of life in society (see Rosa [2005] 2013).

Since Horkheimer envisioned the core of critical theory as an explicit and systematic engagement with the gravity concrete socio-historical conditions exert on the process of social research and the development of the theory of society, including especially critical theory itself, it is necessary to establish how exactly concrete socio-historical conditions facilitate and impede the formulation of research questions, and the pursuit of research and theory. Lack of concern with regard to this issue translates more or less directly into a process of normalizing that which is specific, unusual, and especially problematic, in a manner that perpetuates and solidifies the defining features of particular societal circumstances in time and space. In modern capitalist societies, moreover, how precisely societies are modern *and* capitalist must be considered, recognized, and explicated fully, in order to reduce as much as possible the likelihood that the formulation of questions, and the processes of research and theory-formation themselves, reflect and are expressions of existing societal conditions. For instance, if modern capitalism is fraught with competition and the Protestant work-ethic, it is inevitable that research and theory replicate, perpetuate, and deepen competition and work-ethic, paradoxically, in the attempt to illuminate how competition and work-ethic are integral to modern society.

Critical theory emerged as the explicit effort to track and trace the permutations of social life that resulted from the ongoing dynamics of capitalist market economies as they changed, as it were, under the feet, around the bodies, and above the heads of people living their lives, more or less successfully, in what they experienced as normalcy of everyday life. Yet, this experience was saturated by patterns endemic to corporate capitalism – without individuals being fully cognizant of this fact, and in the absence of categories and tools conducive to illuminating this condition, interpreting the latter as natural and inevitable characteristics of life in mass societies.

In the reception of Horkheimer's classical essay ([1937] 1972), this aspect has been overlooked or de-emphasized with a certain degree of consistency, to the detriment of the kind and quality of contributions critical theorists could and should have made since the 1930s. In classical critical theory, the aspiration to confront this issue persisted latently, in transposition of Marx's corresponding contentions as they preceded the philosophy of social science, and never fully materialized. In subsequent generations, the aspiration largely disappeared. There are two primary reasons for this initial latency and subsequent disappearance. First, critical theory constitutionally emerged as an explicitly comparative project, as it was grounded in the concrete life experiences of its proponents, who had reached adulthood in Germany, and who fully

engaged in the process of social research only in exile in the United States (see Dahms, 2016). Even though the programmatic conceptualization of critical theory came about in New York in the 1930s, this fact has tended to be downplayed as only marginally relevant. Yet, contrary to most later critical theorists, the early members of the Institute for Social Research lived in, actively experienced, and reflected upon three different incarnations of modern society. Most of the members had reached adulthood in Weimar Germany – which at least nominally, was a democratic republic – and then underwent the transformation of an incomplete modern society, into a form of social organization that at the same time was in some regards rabidly anti-modernist (with regard to cultural modernity) and in others radically hyper-modernist (with regard to rationalizing modernization), depending on how we endow the meaning of *modern*. After having experienced three versions of modern society in Germany, if we include the warped modernity of the Imperial period that ended in military defeat and socialist revolution in 1918, the early critical theorists experienced and lived in a fourth version of modern society, upon their arrival in the United States. Horkheimer's contention of the need to scrutinize the bearing specific socio-historical circumstances have on the human sciences, including critical theory, indeed does reflect that his work is expressive of the fact that it is not possible to develop an adequate theory of modern society – and corresponding understanding of critical theory – solely on the basis of extensive primary experience with one single version of modern society. After all, in the absence of the opportunity to compare at least two incarnations of modern societies, it is difficult to conceive of a reliable safeguard against conflating unique features of one's own particular modern society, with features of the genus, modern society, in general.

In this context, Pollock's task was to accomplish for the 1930s what Hilferding had achieved in 1910, namely to provide 'a study of the latest phase of capitalist development,' as Hilferding had subtitled *Finance Capital* ([1910] 1981). However, while Hilferding did not claim to treat the later stage of capitalist development as a qualitatively different politico-economic and socio-economic arrangement, but merely as the continuation of the logic Marx had identified, Horkheimer and Pollock started out from the assumption that the political economy that emerged during the 1920s, and especially during the 1930s, called for a different type of critique.⁷ As a result, the early Frankfurt School's critique of capitalism took the form, on the one hand and under the leadership of Horkheimer, of a social-philosophical critique of western civilization in the spirit of Marx's critiques of alienation and commodity fetishism that culminated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1947] 2002). On the other hand, in the hands of Pollock, the critique manifested itself as a peculiar hybrid between traditional economic theory and a positivist reading of Marx in terms of 'state capitalism' – indeed, as a form of *traditional Marxism* (see Postone, 1993). In combination with Adorno's appropriation of Lukács's reconstruction of Marx's critique of alienation within the framework of Marx's later critique commodity fetishism, in terms of *reification*, the early critical theorists' critique of capitalism thus culminated as a critique of *instrumental reason*.

The agenda of the early Frankfurt School translated into the interpretation and experience of a 'socially' constructed world – really, a world constructed by capital that is being experienced and interpreted as social and socially constructed – as given, as if it were possible to presume the existence of life in modern society once and for all, whereas critical theory is a radical form of epistemology: patterns of social life exist not in a persistent forms, but as expressions of the transmutations of the logic of capital. It is here that Pollock failed – critical theory as rendered here, in the spirit of Horkheimer, must have been alien to his thought, as he

was not able to look through the facade of capitalism to the forms that result from it and that reveal its logic.⁸

In his most controversial contribution, published in 1941 and entitled ‘State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations’ (1941a), Pollock identified as the key to analyzing capitalism the ideal-typical concept of ‘state capitalism’, contending that the latter had constituted the vanishing point for analyzing advanced capitalism, and reached its height in National Socialism (esp. Pollock 1941b), though this general trend could be observed elsewhere also. The central feature of state capitalism was the suspension of the market mechanism in economies dominated by large corporations: in state capitalist societies, the primacy of the economy characteristic of liberal capitalism had been replaced by the primacy of the state. Pollock introduced a set of crucial distinctions. First, four aspects of the new economy are better explained in terms of ‘state capitalism’ than in terms of the primacy and relative autonomy of the economic sphere, such as “[s]tate organized private property monopoly capitalism”, “managerial society”, “administrative capitalism”, “bureaucratic collectivism”, and others. The four aspects are: ‘state capitalism is the successor of private capitalism . . . the state assumes important functions of the private capitalist . . . profit interests still play a significant role, and . . . it is not socialism’ (Pollock 1941a: 201). Private capitalism had been succeeded by a non-private, ‘public’ form of capitalism. Medium-sized businesses that had dominated the industrial economies of the later nineteenth century had been replaced by ‘monopolistic’ enterprises during the early decades of the twentieth century, and nineteenth-century categories of political economy, as well as its Marxian critique, had been superseded by early twentieth-century political economy. Indeed, the utility of core categories and distinctions of economic theory, such as market vs. planning, private vs. public, had become doubtful. Instead of providing a compelling economic argument as to why the larger size of businesses mattered, independently of related implications for the market/planning and private/public distinctions, Pollock asserted that with the rise of ‘monopolistic’ economic organizations, the administrative state had turned into a central *economic* player.

Pollock distinguished two forms of state capitalism – totalitarian and democratic – whose respective nature can vary greatly, depending on the specific form of government and the social groups that control it (p. 201). With the economic process now being fully manageable, three related concerns arise: What are the ends of economic production? What is the purpose of it being administered? Who are the administrators and distributors of economic output?

With reference to the ‘new set of rules’, Pollock (1941a: 204-07) distinguished between market capitalism as an economy where ‘men meet . . . as agents of the exchange process, as buyers or sellers,’ as opposed to state capitalism as a system where ‘men meet . . . as commander or commanded’ (p. 207), especially with regard to the working population. Yet Pollock skirted the issue of the inner logic of both economic production and distribution, and asserted that in state capitalism, the profit motive is replaced by the power motive. Though Pollock might have considered necessary conditions for levels of productivity reached during the early twentieth century in the most advanced industrial societies to be maintained, once large corporations were subject to state supervision and regulation in state capitalism, he did not do so. Instead, he assumed that once high levels of industrial production had been reached, a shift of society’s economic planning function from monopolistic corporations to the state would not be detrimental to productivity. In state capitalism, there no longer is a need to heed the inner logic of the economic process, as the entrepreneurial and capitalist functions are being ‘interfered with or taken over’ by management and the government (p. 210). Private ownership of production and distribution facilities will continue, but control of monopolistic industries and their enterprises

will be in the hands of government. Pollock also presented arguments for why there can be an adequate incentive structure for a state capitalist system; why the separation of price and production will not hurt the latter; why the state capitalist system does not need to suffer from the kind of wastefulness and inefficiency characteristic of market capitalism; and why economics as a social science will lose its object (pp. 203, 210, 215; 217).

A new ruling class of ‘key bureaucrats in the business, state and party that are allied with the remaining vested interests’ (p. 221) will control the economy, and ‘capitalists’ of old lose any necessary social function, though free professions and owners of small and medium-sized businesses will play a role. The majority – salaried employees – ‘are subject to the leader principle of command and obedience’ (p. 222). Appearance and essence of the new state will be one: embodiment of power and instrument of the ruling class.

Yet, can a non-totalitarian, democratic form of state capitalism function? ‘If our thesis proves to be correct,’ Pollock wrote, ‘society on its present level can overcome the handicaps of the market system by economic planning. Some of the best brains of [the United States] are studying the problem how such planning can be done in a democratic way, but a great amount of theoretical work will have to be performed before answers to every question will be forthcoming’ (p. 225). Economics as a social science will become superfluous (ironically, along with the critique of political economy pointing out that economics is the ideology of capitalism). Since state capitalism was capable of covering up and domesticating class conflict and social inequality by means of full employment, this non-progressive form of social, political and economic organization even would be able to manage successfully the danger of social and political unrest resulting from remaining underlying economic contradictions. For this reason, as well as due to its economic superiority, Pollock regarded state capitalism as a social formation that, once in place, could continue to exist for a long period of time.

In Pollock’s view, the logic of capital accumulation followed closely the patterns characteristic of liberal capitalism, and thus did not call for a thorough revision of the mode of analysis in Marx’s critique of political economy – nor whether and to what degree the categories of classical economic theory Marx had criticized still were viable. As a consequence, Pollock’s analysis was not a critique of political economy in the Marxian sense.

“State Capitalism” or “Totalitarian Monopoly Capitalism”? Horkheimer between Pollock and Neumann

To be sure, given the relative lack of an infrastructure conducive for focused economic analysis at the Institute, Pollock was in a poor position to take on the challenge of updating Marx’s critique of political economy for post-liberal capitalism on his own. By contrast, in his major work, *Behemoth*, the first comprehensive study of National Socialism, Franz Neumann rejected Pollock’s analysis – ‘The very term ‘state capitalism’ is a *contradictio in adjecto*’ (Neumann 1942: 224) – and proposed instead the concept of ‘totalitarian monopoly capitalism’ (p. 261).⁹ Neumann insisted that the market process had not been suspended in National Socialism, but rather exposed the Nazi government to tremendous economic and financial pressure: the capitalist mode of production continued unabated, albeit in a highly organized, integrated and state-coordinated fashion (Neumann 1942: 227-28).

The difference between ‘state capitalism’ and ‘totalitarian monopoly capitalism’ is more than nomenclature. Pollock’s term places greater emphasis on the state than Neumann, as far as the inner logic of the economy is concerned. To Pollock, state capitalism signifies a qualitative

transformation expressing the shift of society's economic planning function from the economy to the state. To Neumann, by contrast, in Nazi Germany, the economic planning function continues to be held by large corporations, many of which actively supported the Nazi regime, e.g., using politics to curry favorable business conditions. Neumann also cautioned that Pollock's vision amounted to the proclamation of the end of history and the demise of any possibility for future qualitative societal transformations.

Both *state capitalism* and *totalitarian monopoly capitalism* imply more manifestly cooperative forms of business-government relations. The difference is mainly one of emphasis, especially in light of the fact that Pollock presented state capitalism as an ideal-typical model; state capitalism stressed the amplified role of the state, whereas totalitarian monopoly capitalism ceded more importance to the economy. More importantly, however, this difference signals distinct modes of theorizing the inner logic of the economic process. According to Pollock, compared to the challenge of understanding the politics of state capitalism, the inner logic of capitalist production is secondary. According to Neumann, the inner logic of capitalist production and its understanding remain central: it is not possible to discern the nature of totalitarian monopoly capitalism without sophisticated grasp on the inner logic of the economic process under changing conditions, and its relative independence from the state.

Horkheimer initially had considered this new development in the relationship between economy and the state a temporary return to an authoritarian form of government. By 1940, however, Horkheimer agreed with Pollock that the rise of authoritarian regimes like National Socialism was not an aberration in the logic of capitalist development, but a necessary consequence under conditions where capitalist production had created its own potential undoing, the Great Depression. Accordingly, the rise of authoritarian regimes had to be theorized in terms of capitalist categories, but not, paradoxically, in terms of the logic of capital. As Wiggershaus put it, 'Horkheimer held that the epoch of liberal capitalism must be conceived as a process which made a spiral of lasting despotism possible by atomizing human beings and producing large-scale companies and gigantic organizations' (Wiggershaus [1986] 1994): 280).

The problem with Pollock is that he was a traditional, mainstream economist with positivist leanings, working with a Marxist agenda, and disinterested in the nature of modern economics, including its socially constructed and mediated character. He was a traditional Marxist economist for whom the concept of state capitalism served as a means to evade adherence to and amplification of Marx's critique of political economy. His interest in examining and scrutinizing the inner logic of the capitalist economic process, and especially the logic of capital, was limited, to whatever degree it may have been present. It is ironic, in retrospect, that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1947] 2002) was dedicated to Pollock, as there is no tangible evidence that he appreciated the theoretical and intellectual contribution it represented, as far as his own work and agenda was concerned. There is no mention of their work in any of his later writings, and the mode of theorizing Horkheimer and Adorno developed and applied in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is exceedingly incompatible with Pollock's mode of thinking. This is at least as true of Horkheimer's concern, as laid out in his 1937 essay, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', with the impact specific socio-historical conditions have on efforts in philosophy and social science, including economics, to illuminate the vicissitudes and destructive dimensions of modern societies.

Though Pollock and Neumann came closest to a theory of economic process and organization in advanced capitalism, and their perspectives negotiated the gap between traditional and critical Marxism differently, with regard to critical theory's ability to confront the

‘socio-logic’ of capital, at successive stages in the expansion and spread of capitalism, their writings were as much contribution and impediment.¹⁰ In retrospect, the work of Neumann was far more sensitive to the specificities of the role and intricacies of economic processes and organization in National Socialism, and consequently, would have provided a more constructive foundation for the kind of work that was most needed *after* World War II, in Germany, in the United States, and elsewhere.

In terms of his conceptualization of *critical theory*, Horkheimer ([1937] 1972) was explicitly concerned with how the logic of capital both manifests itself in, and how it shapes, social life, in ways that must be scrutinized both systematically and radically. By contrast, Pollock’s concept of ‘state capitalism’ is indicative of a perspective that lacked appreciation of a phenomenon such as the logic of capital as an object of study for critical theory. Neumann’s concept of ‘totalitarian monopoly capitalism’, on the other hand, comprised observations consistent with the need to examine the logic of capital, even though he did not do so himself, instead focusing on political and economic processes and organization fundamental to National Socialism as an incarnation of post-liberal capitalism, at the institutional level.

However, at the same time, the members of the Institute for Social Research during the 1930s paid far less attention to the underlying logic of capital on its own terms, instead delegating related responsibilities to the member who may well have been least well-suited to take on the challenge, despite his related academic credentials. As a result, the early Frankfurt School neglected to examine precisely the types of impact the *socially mediating and constitutive nature* of capital had on forms of social, political, and cultural life (see Postone, 1993; also Brentel, 1989). Rather than paying as close attention as possible to the minutiae of economic processes and their increasing power to influence and shape individual and social dimensions of human existence, as Horkheimer had promised it in his programmatic essay on critical theory, the influence of capitalist economics on politics, culture, and society – as well as academia – was implicitly presumed at a general level. Yet, this generalized attitude was not conducive to grasping the specificity of the processes of social mediation the logic of capital inculcates, such as alienation, commodity fetishism, and reification, thus making it *both practically and theoretically* difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish clearly between ‘human’ nature and the nature of the ‘social’, on the one hand, and how their forms of appearance are expressive of the logic of economic processes rather than characteristics of human and social existence. As a consequence, the critique of modern society became separate – indeed, independent – from the critique of political economy.

Pollock’s theory and critique of ‘postliberal’ capitalism as ‘state capitalism’ provided an easy, and probably welcome excuse not to hone in on the intricacies of the logic of capital, arduous and tedious as such an effort inevitably would have appeared to the members of the Institute for Social Research, given their individual interests, talents, and proclivities. Pollock’s influence on the Institute’s program and related efforts to conceive of, develop, and apply a qualitatively superior form of social research might best be described as comparable to a *virus* that in some regards prevented the programmatic core concern from taking hold and critical theory from ‘running properly’.

In retrospect, the bulk of such efforts, in danger of succumbing to the lure of professional success to begin with, were ever in danger to fall prey to the temptation to assimilate to facets of traditional theory – e.g., to work towards a general theory of society, of the economy, of the state – to confront evidence that the latter most definitely would not assimilate to – or seriously consider the importance of – critical theory. As a consequence, as is especially the case in the

desire to frame later versions of critical theory in terms of a particular *paradigm* – an approach that is not compatible with Horkheimer’s design for critical theory – there is at least a degree of obliviousness regarding the need to examine with exactitude the gravity concrete socio-historical conditions have been exerting on the process of engaging in, and of advancing especially critically and theoretically oriented forms of, social research. As a result, recent incarnations of ‘critical theory’ may exemplify, to a far larger extent than they should, the workings of twenty-first century capitalism, rather than applying critical self-reflexivity to the possibility and danger that what is put forth as ‘critical theory’ could be, to a larger degree than it should, a form of traditional theory, appearing in the garb of critique.

Critical Theory in the Twenty-First Century: From the Logic of *Capital* to the Logic of *Artifice*

Critical theory frequently is assumed to be concerned above all with emancipation, liberation, and the critique of ideology, in order to prepare a kind of political praxis that will foster qualitative social transformations in modern society which ought to engender ever greater correspondence between facts and norms. Undoubtedly, the successful reconciliation of the latter – in terms of explicitly stated values shared by the majority of a given population – has constituted the vanishing point of critical theory from the start, even if not spelled out in those terms across all three generations. Yet, critical theorists did not envision such reconciliation as taking the form either of superimposition of “norms” onto “facts” (assimilation of the material conditions in a particular society to prevailing norms and values-- however the latter may be identified, and by whom – regardless of the myriad social, political, and economic costs that might or would result), or of superimposition of “facts” onto the normative structure of society (with norms and values turning into a function of the existing distribution of wealth, political and social structure, etc., whatever the corresponding social, political, and cultural costs). Neither of these two options, to be sure, would deserve the designation, “reconciliation,” as both presumably would involve an application of force according to the logic of power, rather than heed the nature of more or less incremental, dialectical back-and-forth approximations of discernible improvement. Indeed, the constitutional logic of modern society is such that “reconciliation” is conceivable to most actors exclusively in terms of superimposing facts over norms or vice versa.

The legitimacy of modern society to a large extent rests on its ability to provide individuals as members of more or less diverse social groups, within the overall system of social structure, with opportunities to direct their efforts, in everyday life as well as public life, at working towards the establishment of a social universe that is consistent with the values that guide their lives, regardless of where exactly those values originate, as long as they are consonant with conditions experienced as authentic. At the same time, however, modern society frustrates those efforts for most of its members most of the time, and for many of its members all of the time. It is in this context that the importance of knowledge of differences and similarities between and across societies of the same type, especially with regard to modern societies, is difficult to overestimate. Although modern societies share many features, they also are characterized by differences which could and should serve as the basis for learning processes enabling those societies that tackle a specific set of challenges – e.g., a certain type of social problem – more effectively than others, to provide the latter with the know-how needed to handle those problems more effectively also, potentially along a spectrum of indicators. Yet, to date,

this potential for “learning from other worlds” (see Parrinder, 2001; Jalata and Dahms, 2015) while theoretically easily conceivable, hardly has had any practical impact, except when imposed by force by imperial powers. Rather, in most cases, modern societies appear to maintain order and function precisely by shielding themselves against knowledge of how similar societies confront challenges that all societies must meet, in more successful fashion. This shielding appears to be symptomatic of one aspect of the underlying logic of modern societies – their constitutional logic. In the absence of comparative-historical analysis that is informed especially by the work and perspective of the first generation of critical theorists, the most problematic aspects of the constitutional logic of modern society are likely to remain concealed, and to continue to fester (Dahms, 2016).

Critical theory must break with the desire to frame the process of critically analyzing modern society on the basis of assumptions whose prevalence the operations of the latter are contingent on. Put differently, critical theorists must develop and deploy a set of categories that pertain to the actuality of modern society, with special attention being paid to the consequences that result from its operations for humans, animals, the biosphere, forms of solidarity, and the horizon of the future. Critical theorists also and especially must scrutinize how modern society rests on and expands a system of capitalist economic production that comes at the price of intensifying social and environmental destruction. Given the limitations of resources on planet Earth, which are being depleted rapidly, and the apparent imminence of further population growth, in the context of a global socio-economic structure characterized by proliferating and deepening inequality, it is necessary to evaluate modern society not in terms of what we are supposed to think it represents or to infer it has the potential of becoming, if conditions were right to facilitate the realization of the potential modern society represents. Instead, to the extent that critical theory is a normative project, it is necessary to identify and apply standards in the process of social research that pertain to the myriad costs that go hand in hand with maintaining modern society as is. The latter constitutes a social system which, in light of its history to date, does not appear to have the capacity, or the impetus, to undergo the kind of qualitative transformations that would enable actors to work to comprehend, diminish, limit and overcome the price human beings, animals, and the planet pay in order to sustain it. Willingness to comply with this “price” is related to the desirability of maintaining economic growth in its present form as the seeming precondition for keeping modern society stable.

Yet, from individuals concerned with the condition of the environment or the planet, to collective actors in charge of navigating the tension between purportedly democratic politics – from the local to the global level – and a global economic system that is inversely related to the possibility of democracy, the price to be paid and the costs to be shouldered in order to maintain the existing system exact a kind of emotional, psychological, social and cultural destruction that presumably is impossible to maintain. Furthermore, it is bound to erode the motivational structure without which neither modern society can function, nor most individuals. Indeed, more or less clearly, a growing number of individuals appear to sense that modern society, absent its capacity to undergo qualitative transformations that would lead – or at least would be conducive – to greater correspondence between facts and norms, represents a “structural lie” of sorts, a promise that is becoming discernible as unrealizable:

[I]n the early decades of the 2000s, as both the culture of Western modernity and the institutional salience of *the* State begin to retreat as the exclusive, even essential, resources of collective life, there is good reason to repeal resistance at least enough to think of the global realities of these new times as revealing, perhaps aggravating, social

antimatter of global proportions. States, for one, have as chief among their interests supporting those elements of their culture that encourage the idea that all is well, at least on the national interior. Though they seldom can get away with the deception, sooner or later the legitimation crisis tears at the veil of secrecy and the national public sees the true seamy side of their society. (Lemert, 2011: 230)

There are mounting indications that the present is *not* a time when legitimation crises necessarily or at all lead to revelations about the “seamy side of society” (see also Wolfe, 1978), but rather, may amplify the determination among many not to confront or acknowledge this seamy side – to pretend that it does not exist, thus presenting a concrete form of “social antimatter” that may well have a tendency to proliferate, as it is highly synchronous with modern society as *artifice*, and indicative that capital may no longer have the explanatory power it used to represent. Indeed, we may have been undergoing a process of transition from modern society being a function of capital, to it turning into a function of artifice, as the human motivation force behind facilitating and supporting capital that gave it some sense is disappearing, and all that is left is capital’s hollow shell – a black hole that is sucking in everything, despite, against, and possibly due to proliferating resistance (Dahms, in preparation). To the extent that social scientists apply established concepts, methods and frameworks to the study of the modern condition that were consonant with earlier incarnations of the latter, they describe the *artifice* of modern society, rather than scrutinizing the proliferating discrepancies between the categories employed and the realities discerned. The paradox is that the social sciences increasingly are running the risk, against their very intentions, and in large measure due to the counterintuitive constitutional logic of modern society, to perpetuate, legitimate, and even amplify the hollowing out of social forms, in terms of what is *social* and what is *modern*: artifice as alienation transposed onto the totality of modern society, with anomie and the Protestant ethic as its ever less discernible corollaries.

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Endnotes

¹ Two recent collections are informative in this regard, though not necessarily illustrative of too great an emphasis on more practical or praxis-oriented agendas: Wilkerson and Paris (2001) and Ludovisi (2015).

² See Claussen, Negt and Werz (1999), esp. Claussen (1999) and Werz (1999).

³ As the last eight years have taught us, one could argue that even with the help of sociology, desirable long- or medium-term qualitative social change has been hard to come by, although, as will become apparent in the next section of this chapter, to date, sociology has not lived up to its potential as far as scrutinizing the mediating forces facilitating the socio-logic of capital is concerned.

⁴ As the corresponding concept that highlights the process quality of artifice I propose “abliguration”: “To spend in luxurious indulgence” that is highly wasteful and not conducive to sustainability at any level. It shine slight on how modern society in fact works, as opposed to how we are supposed to presume it works. The shift in biomass mentioned earlier, from animals (and plants) to humans is symptomatic for how societies as well as individuals operate and “maintain” themselves today, at the expense, potentially, of all others, in a manner that continuously extracts resources from the planet and form other humans. It this process is allowed to continue unabated, it inevitably will spell doom. See Dahms (in preparation).

⁵ Esp. Wolf (1979). Wolf is one of a number of sophisticated and prominent scholars who have dedicated their time and energy to providing reinterpretations of Marx’s writings that highlight their intensifying relevance today, even though their interpretations are not without conflicts and disagreements, such as Moishe Postone (1993), Helmut Reichelt (2001; 2008), and Hans Georg Backhaus (2011); see also Larsen, Nilges and Robinson (2014)

⁶ Plight in this general sense has continued to plague the tradition of Critical Theory to this day. Ronge and Ronge (1979) and Fay et al. (1980) were noteworthy attempts to integrate economic analysis into Critical Theory since the 1930s. More than a decade before discussions about globalization began, Ronge and Ronge (1979) cautioned that ‘late capitalism’ was not necessarily characterized by increasing politicization (p. 205) and that the ‘self-organization’ of capital (p. 206) could serve as an anchor for promoting the common good. Perhaps the boldest, most rigorous and pertinent attempt to date to delineate a Critical Theory of the underlying logic of modern century capitalism that is situated explicitly within this tradition, is Postone (1993).

⁷ For a detailed examination of the evolution of Pollock’s role at the Institute and his concept of ‘state capitalism’, see Dahms (2000), especially pp. 332-352.

⁸ For recent depictions of this logic, see Chibber (2013) and Vogl (2015 [2010]). Regarding the notion of ‘*socio*’-logic, see Postone (1993), chapter 3.

⁹ For his critique of ‘state capitalism’, see pp. 221-234.

¹⁰ While Postone (1993) has provided the most promising foundation for theoretically sophisticated critiques of the global economy, it must be supplemented with a social theory of the deepening artificiality of contemporary societies—for Critical Theory to embrace what should be its defining challenge today.