TRANSFORMATIONS
comparative study of social transformations
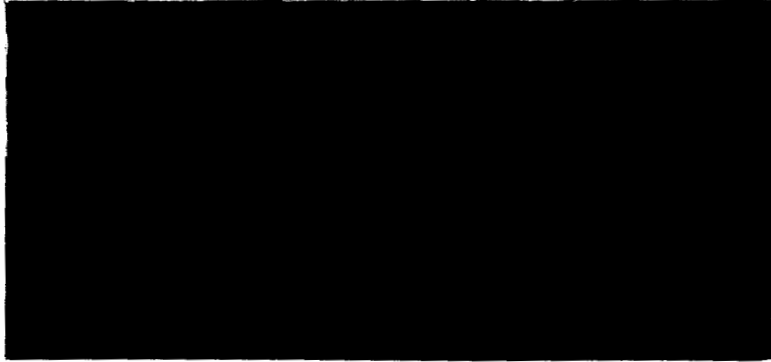
"Critical Theory in a World of Uncertainties"

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Critical Theory in a World of Uncertainties

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Europe became for a while the center of the human universe for the simple reason that modernity was born here, and that the European fictions were written from modernity's perspective. Since Europe - modern Europe- has appeared as the outcome of world history, Europe was presented as the embodiment of universality. And this was not entirely self-delusion. Universality, as it is meant here, relates to generality as a philosophical 'category' to a notion. The foundational principle of (originally European) modernity, namely the sentence that all men are born free, is the grounding statement of human universality. Many universal concepts were forged from the interpretation of "humankind," among them cultural or art.

By now, the whole world became modern. Europe's invention, modernity, has actually conquered the world. Decolonization was not the sign of the failure, but of the success of the European (ad)venture. Europe had to decolonize, because the colonized-at least the bulk of the colonized-became moderns. The modern social arrangement has no serious competitors anymore. I know that my summary statement that the whole world became modern by now sounds odd and unconvincing, if one considers the huge, and perhaps increasing gap in wealth, health, well being among various people in various regions of the world. But this objection refutes only those positions which entertain a progressivist view of modernity. If one concedes that modernity, albeit a new kind of social arrangement in comparison to all the rest, is neither worse, nor better, just different than the premodern arrangements, one will not attribute the huge differences in the standard of living, the constant wars, or the upsurge of fundamentalism to the remnants of barbarism, or to the conspiracy of the North which withholds cunningly the fruits of modernization from the South, but will see in them the characteristic maladies of modernity itself. Neither are such malaises problems that can be solved once and for all. The modern European spirit entertains the illusions that every evil is a problem which can be handled technologically, that every malfunction can be eliminated if one provides the malfunctioning machine with good spare parts. This does not mean that things cannot be improved, or that no misfortunes can be remedied. Only that afterward another will

occur. Everything else is self-delusion. It is enough to reflect on the 20th century to see what I mean. The European progression brought the world Bolshevism and Nazism; both were the offsprings of modernity, both were universalistic insofar as they were striving for world mastery, and both were the ugliest cases of a fundamentalist identity politics. Finally, both were the products of enlightenment and nihilism. From the enlightenment they have borrowed their faith in science and technology, the ideology of mastery, the arrogance of man's deification (for god is dead) and from nihilism a criminal moral relativism and the blatant contempt of truth.

Enlightenment prepared the ground for the modern social arrangement insofar as it generalized and legitimized the procedure of the dynamics of modernity. The modern world, as Hegel already noticed, is not destroyed by negation, but, to the contrary, thrives on it. The old, premodern world, this natural edifice had been deconstructed through this dynamics. As we know, deconstruction is not simply destruction, but goes with the deciphering of the origin of the edifice it destroys. This shows that the grand narrative belonged to the process of the deconstruction of the pre-modern social arrangement itself. Yet, since the deconstruction became accomplished, the grand narrative has done its service and so it is gone.

The dynamics of modernity proceeds like metaphysical philosophy. It juxtaposes ought to existence (e.g. 'not that this is true, but something else is.' not that this is just, something else would be just or more just'). Cultural discourse is just one manifestation of this dynamics, and by far not the only one. It belongs to my understanding of cultural discourse (borrowed from Kant's description of the 'Streit' among judgments of taste) that it is and end in itself. Discussion goes on for discussion's sake. In contrast, the dynamics of modernity normally aims at the change of institutions, laws and else, that is, at pragmatic results. Several kinds of delegitimating/legitimating discourse are conducted by the firmly set rules of institutions, and this is especially true about the institution of science. True, those rules can also become time to time upset. Still, cultural discourse and pragmatic discourse are not isolated from one another. Even with no pragmatic aims to achieve, cultural discourse influences pragmatic discourse and its eventual outcome. The former frequently sets the agenda for the latter. A public 'gets used' to certain

opinions and becomes open for a change if the participants to the cultural discourse or cultural discourse itself wields authority. Only something that wields authority can contribute, even if unwittingly, to the abuse and destruction of other (ancient) authorities. All kinds of critical theories participate in such a discourse.

As long as one says: 'this is not true, something else is' (for example: religion is a lie, science provides the truth) enlightenment is neither nihilistic nor does it threaten with self destruction. The dynamics of modernity reaches its limits when no affirmation follows from the negation, more precisely, when negation does not result from the acceptance of a 'rational' position as the normal functioning of modernity requires. This happens when cultural discourse accepts presuppositions like there is no justice, no truth, no morality, the distinction between beautiful and ugly is meaningless and so on. For at this point the dynamics of modernity (this is not good, something else is) can proceed only under the condition that it negates the outcome of enlightenment and enlightenment itself ('it is not true that nothing is true, because this and this is - absolutely - true,' or: 'unlimited discourse is evil, limited discourse is good instead.') Without such a radical turnaround cultural discourse disappears, for there is nothing to discuss anymore. But if there is a radical turnaround, cultural discourse will be authoritatively limited, it will not be critical, and the enlightenment process must be launched again, as the repetition of the beginning. This has happened in totalitarian states, this might also happen in contemporary fundamentalist societies and movements. Absolute relativism (if this limit can actually be reached, what I doubt), ends in social chaos or pushes towards fundamentalism. Yet since fundamentalism has resulted from the dynamics of modernity, it is <u>fundamentalism without fundament</u>, without tradition. This merry-go-round is a characteristic feature of modernity, and appears, although in different versions, amidst all the paradoxes of enlightenment/nihilism. Whether this merry-go-round has a tendency, or whether it is just a modern version of the eternal return of the same, I cannot tell.

I will now briefly discuss the main paradoxes of enlightenment/nihilism in 20th century (contemporary) Europe. Everyone is familiar with some of those paradoxes such as the paradox of universality/particularity, form/content, identity/difference. I believe that behind all those paradoxes there are the all encompassing ones: the paradox of freedom

and that of truth. If I wanted to summarize briefly what enlightenment as nihilism means, I would answer that both freedom and truth have assumed a paradoxical character.

Why am I speaking of paradoxes? Because each concept in a pair of values (e.g. universality/particularity or difference) carries in itself, or produces its own opposite, yet without the possibility of reconciliation or sublimation, for the opposite, again, carries, and brings about, the first, and so on and so forth, in a series of 'bad infinity' as Hegel called it. Hegel insisted that bad infinity is the result of the limitedness of our thinking. I don't see it in this light. I do not trace the Hegelian dialectics here.

What I described briefly, namely that European discoursive culture produces paradoxes, is the main discovery of reflected postmodern thinking. I would even say, that this is the only, or at least the main, novelty in postmodern thinking. Reflected postmodern thinking is the consciousness of modernity, or the metathinking of modernity, insofar as it reflects upon modernity, critically and ironically. Modern thinking believed in progression or in regression, in problem solving and in the sublation of all contradictions. Postmodern thinking does not.

To avoid misunderstanding: the main categories of modernity do not necessarily appear as paradoxes in daily thinking and practices. The paradox is, as I already mentioned, temporalized. At one point one of the category/pair (e.g. universalism) seems to become the main tendency of the modern world. Then, however, with the same self confidence, particularity/difference takes its place. Traditional modern European thinking vested its faith in reconciliation; universal values will be accepted by all, and all the differences can peacefully coexist with each other and share in a (common) universality. All normative theories of modernity (my own theory of justice included) design models for the reconciliation between universality and difference. Yet if one takes the position of postmodern consciousness, the illusory character of such normative theories immediately comes to light. Normative theories abolish temporality (temporal sequences) and incompatibilities: for example, that universality can give birth to differences - in time - which become incompatible with the former. In fact, even if not in a peaceful and ideal manner, this movement, the temporalization of paradox, can also prevent the self-destruction of modernity. Instead of running amok in one direction, there can come to a

circular movement, or to the swing of a pendulum where each of the pair (e.g. /
universality/particularity) carries the day at one moment, whereas the other gathers
momentum as a reaction to the former. Actually, the emphasis put on difference, which
prepared the way to ethnic identity politics, gender politics, sexual politics,
multiculturalism and alike, is a reaction to the previous universalistic trend. In theory, one
can design a model of reconciliation. Normative theories reconcile universality and
difference such that they put together their respective "goodies" without the "badies," a
benevolent selective project histories rarely follow. The opposite, to reconcile only the
'badies' without 'goodies' would e.g. mean to think world wars together with local
terrorism. Fortunately, histories are not selective in a malevolent manner either. My
skeptical remarks, however, are not directed against normative theories. In presenting a
model of 'reconciliation' they can help to push the pendulum away from an extreme
position (of mere universality and mere difference in the now discussed case) whenever it
swings into one direction too dangerously.

To offer another example, let me briefly scrutinize the form/substance paradox in
arts. In the times of high modernism, particularly in music, yet also in painting and fiction,
or in architecture, the desubstantialization of artworks seemed to be unstoppable.
Formalization, however, can soon reach a stage from where one cannot go further, for
there is no further. Pure serial music, a white circle painted on a white canvass,
nongrammatical text, minimalist architecture - were such endpoints in one direction. Since
there are artists who desire to practice their creative talents and imagination and are not
satisfied to compose serial music or plan minimalist buildings ad infinitum, a volte face
was needed - back to stories, to representational painting, to postmodern quotations in
architecture, to harmony or even melody in music, and so forth - that is, towards the
resubstantialization of mere form. One cannot say, please, compose like Beethoven or
perhaps Mozart, for in their works the tension between substance and form had been
sublimated. The tendency can be reversed, but not towards "reconciliation." Normative
theories of art resembles the normative political or social theories. They are not
"mistaken," neither are they "old fashioned." Although they have no authority to
prescribe, and they, in fact, do not describe, they do a great service in casting doubt on the

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too easy conviction that the last way to do things is the only way doing them. It is thus that they participate in the cultural discourse and fertilize it.

Contemporary - postmodern - critical theories are more modest. They do not need ontological underpinnings; they escape all systems and isms. They are aware of their tentative character, fragility and finitude. They simply show the sore spot where the shoe presses now. They do not aim at theoretical consistency. After all yesterday the shoe pressed the right toe, whereas today it pressed the left toe. When universalism becomes oppressive critical theory makes case for the difference. When difference becomes oppressive it makes a case for universality. Postmodern critical theory faces the paradoxes of modernity without offering sure remedies or total solutions.

These were only examples. And in philosophy, I know, examples are suspect. It is better to turn now to the deepest paradoxes of modernity: the paradox of freedom and that of truth.

Aristotle remarked that European people are known from their devotion to freedom. He meant political freedom, independence, disgust of tyranny and particularly of despotism. But the continuation of the story of European freedom assumed a different character. Although the content of the concept of freedom varies greatly in the philosophies of European modernity and not all of those concepts are holistic, modernity as such is built on the value of freedom, the value of freedom is its universal guiding principle, its arch. And this is exactly the springing point: freedom is taken in modern European culture as if freedom were an arch. But it is not, for it cannot serve as an arch, since freedom is openness, and every arch is a closure. If one returns to freedom as to an arch, as to the foundation of the modern European self understanding, the foundation will show itself as unfounded. It is unfounded in principle. As Kant said, transcendental freedom has no transcendental deduction. <u>Modernity is founded by not being founded</u>. The modern story of the development of freedom, be this development fancied as unilinear or not, is simultaneously the story of the subsequent loss of all fundaments apart from freedom which is none. It is the story of the conscious and willed abandonment of fundaments.

Many concrete kinds of freedom - be it political liberty or moral autonomy - can be reconciled with the acceptance of absolute fundaments. After all, God granted men free will. But the modern concept of freedom, even if not totalizing in each and every case, calls for the interpretation of the universal value of freedom in all possible ways, and insofar as it calls for all possible interpretations, it abolishes all fundaments. This is why enlightenment in a broad sense is nihilism in my (narrower) understanding. Enlightenment means to strive for the fulfillment of modern destiny qua freedom, and the fulfillment strips modern culture from all its foundations and makes it bottomless and also defenseless. Finally, everything boils down to one thing: the foundation of modernity (freedom) is the negation of foundation. Moderns need to learn to live without foundation. They live without Truth.

There are many kinds of truths. The dominant concept of truth in modernity is summed up in the correspondence theory of truth. The dominant concept of truth is not the idea of truth, rather the concept of true knowledge. It offers a tentative criterion to establish whether a kind of knowledge is true or false. This concept of truth is relatively foundational. This sounds odd - how can a principle be relatively foundational? An arch, and still not an arch? yet the division of values spheres of modernity, the phenomenon described by Max Weber, shows how this is possible. The principle of true knowledge founds modern sciences and warrants the progress of science and of technology, insofar it goes on, and as long as it does. But founding science is not yet founding life, morality, the vision of the cosmos, our place in the universe, and the world. Needless to say: the foundation of modern science is also rooted in the all-encompassing idea of freedom, for it is the ideal (the universal concept) of freedom that sets the rational pursuit for more and more knowledge free. The correspondence theory of truth itself is unfounded. And since true knowledge that founds science and yet remains unfounded produces the sole consensually accepted concept of truth in modernity, science becomes the dominating world interpretation of modernity.

This dominating world view is void of moral, religious, existential content. It leaves the existers as existers ((to employ Kierkegaard's language) without offering them a

crutch to lean upon. The correspondence theory of truth is a formal concept of truth. The substance of the concept is freedom, the bottomless, the non foundational.

Freedom as foundation is the absence of foundation. But the absence of foundation grants also its opposite: for if there is no foundation, one is free to embrace any foundation. One is free to commit oneself to an absolute Truth. Modern or postmodern reflections do not prevent anyone to embrace God, the absolute Divine truth, as they do not prevent people or groups of people from embracing any collective creed, conviction as an absolute one, and to subscribe to this creed as to their new fundament. The latter is the gesture of fundamentalism. Neither a personal commitment to the Absolute, nor fundamentalism are founded absolutely, for their certainties are chosen - they do not need them as conditions of their social and personal survival. Chosen certainties are in fact, and in the last instance founded on freedom, based on the bottomless. This is why all modern absolute creeds are as paradoxical as the absence of creeds. This was the great discovery of Kierkegaard.

It is typical to accuse postmodern thinking - both the reflected and the unreflected kind - with relativism.

Critics normally bring an indictment against the unreflected kind. The statement accused with relativism sounds that each and every culture has its own truth. Briefly, unreflected postmodern thinking is a partisan of the general (anthropological) concept of culture. It participates in the cultural discourse with its own token, and this is its truth: it is true that every culture has its own truth. The general concept of culture was born in Europe, the statement is universal in its extension and even categorical, and the concept of truth implies here the correspondence theory of truth, a modern one. But to accuse the unreflected postmodern version of selfcontradiction is irrelevant, at least from the standpoint of a reflected postmodern theory. For the paradox of modernity is not that some claim universal truth whereas others emphasize difference, and promote relativism with an equally strong truth claim, but that this state of affairs is normal. There is as little relativism in modern thinking as there is absolutism. For Freedom as the non-foundational

absolute fundament of modernity begets truths that undercut themselves. This is the paradox that made its appearance first in Europe and is about to win over the whole globe. My objection against the unreflected postmodern thesis that every culture has its own truth is not, that it is paradoxical, but that it is insincere.

Modern men and women, so it seems to me, need to live together with the paradoxes of modernity. I would like to speak here again a few words of Kierkegaard, who was the one to recognize that one can live with the paradox in quite different ways, albeit in all of them one needs to remain aware of the conditio moderna. Unfortunately, there is no time left to speak about him in merit, thus I will present briefly a few thoughts of his philosophy. He writes: I do not say that this is the truth, I say, this is my truth. 'My truth' does not mean that I possess it, but that it possesses me. My truth can be absolute. I can embrace as absolute truth something that can be only approximately known. I can embrace the approximately known as certainty, wholly, by a leap. This final gesture has two connotation. First, the truth which I embrace is a commitment, I cannot pay just lip-service to it, I am in duty bound - by myself, by my own choice - to live according to it. Second, I must remain aware of it that my truth is not "our truth." Because if I transform my truth into our truth, I reject the paradox and become a fundamentalist - whether an absolutist or a relativist fundamentalism makes no difference. But if I embrace an approximation as my truth, - for truth is subjective, - I am standing in the paradox and carry it out. This is no relativism, neither is it fundamentalism or universalism. It means something else, namely to take responsibility for my actions and to remain true to myself. The existential choice cannot be deconstructed.

I could also tell a story about modernity which culminates in an ethics of personality. This would be a partisan story, one sided and suspect. Yet not entirely absurd. In the company of friends who pride with the European legacy I will not tell it. In the company of friends who abuse this legacy, I will.

NOTES: