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Grounding Critical Theory

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In a recent article in *Social Epistemology*, Iaan Reynolds (2021) weights in on the discussion about normative foundations and progress in critical theory. Despite my sympathies for his overall account of critical theory, that takes its cues from early Frankfurt School critical theory by Max Horkheimer and (especially) Theodor W. Adorno, the devil is in the details—and the sum of these details may even change the bigger picture, or so I will suggest. More specifically, I will comment on two of Reynolds’s main claims: first, contra Amy Allen (2016), that critical theory even in its early form needs a notion of backward-looking progress, and second, that cultivating self-reflection is more important for critical theory than justifying normative foundations.

Whereas the argument against Allen is underdeveloped (I), Reynolds’s characterization of self-reflection is too idealistic and individualistic for my taste (II). Furthermore, escaping the pressure to justify critical theory’s normative foundation requires more than referring to “basic human experiences” (3) and the method of negative dialectics (III). However, I offer these critical comments not as attempts to “refute” Reynolds’s account of critical theory but as steps towards an alternative picture, slightly less bound to the authors of Frankfurt School critical theory than to their idea of creating an alternative to traditional theory.

I. Historical Progress and Progress in History

Reynolds starts his discussion by juxtaposing Allen’s critique of justifying the normative foundations of critical theory with reference to “backward-looking progress” or “progress as a fact” with a re-reading of Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002 [1947]) that emphasizes the dialectical relationship between progress and regress. While he agrees with Allen that critical theory must reject the “self-congratulatory narratives of enlightenment reason” (Reynolds 2021, 6), he is skeptical whether that can be achieved by disentangling a forward- and a backward-looking notion of progress, as Allen proposes.

The method of negative dialectics of early Frankfurt School critical theory rather implies, Reynolds argues, that progress and regress are intertwined in a dialectical movement. In tracing this movement, Adorno and Horkheimer are not interested in the project of justifying their normative commitments but in offering a “negatively dialectical social theory that responds to suffering in a contradictory society by reflecting on the simultaneous necessity and contingency of these conditions” (3). The emancipatory idea of a society of free and equal individuals without suffering becomes possible, according to this negative dialectical social theory, only in response to the actual capitalistic progress—the improvements of productivity and technology—that throws into sharp relief how unnecessary want and suffering is in our societies, then and now. Hence, forward-looking progress or “progress as imperative” cannot be separated from backward-looking progress:

For those suffering under present conditions, the capacity to understand these conditions in terms of a process of development whose rationality can be discerned, and whose functioning can thus be interrupted, is of great importance. Critical social theory is thus obliged to retain a conception of

backward-looking historical progress, in order to apprehend the expansion of capitalist social forms, and their increasing domination of social, cultural, and global reality (6 f.).

What kind of necessary relation between forward- and backward-looking progress does Reynolds argue for, and does it really constitute an objection to Allen's account? Notice that Allen (2016) herself admits that any normative criterion will allow us to measure progress according to it both retrospectively and prospectively (32, 226 f.). Thus, she does not reject the conceptual relation between the two notions of progress, which in this respect are different only in their temporal orientation. Yet Reynolds argues (as do, according to Allen, most contemporary critical theorists) for a more substantial relationship between backward- and forward-looking progress, namely that we cannot criticize contemporary society without understanding its history as partially progressive.

At this point, Allen's distinction between "historical progress" and "progress in history" is important, although Reynolds does not mention it. "Historical progress" is what those "self-congratulatory narratives of enlightenment reason" talk about, even if they come as sober sociological accounts of the development of modernity. "Progress in history" instead refers to claims about highly specific trajectories of certain practices in a circumscribed domain; they need no grand narratives but merely specific normative criteria, as the conceptual relation between backward- and forward- looking progress shows. Thus, Allen holds that

... one can reject the idea of *historical progress* as a 'fact' and the role that this idea plays in securing the normative perspective of critique while still admitting that in certain specific cases or domains it makes sense to say that there has been *progress in history*, by which I mean progress in a specific domain as judged by standards that are themselves historically and contextually grounded (original emphasis, 32 f.).

As far as I can see, Reynolds's claim amounts to nothing more than that we can and maybe must be able to understand certain trajectories of our social practices as "progress in history" in Allen's sense.

The real difference between Reynolds and Allen lies elsewhere, namely when it comes to the method of negative dialectics. For Reynolds, negative dialectics is *the* distinctive method of early Frankfurt critical theory: it is what separates critical theory from other social theories and what grounds its critique of contemporary society. Reynolds characterizes it with the well-known idea that critical theory does not pave over the contradictions of society but understands society as contradictory (4). Indeed, reason itself is contradictory: enlightening and oppressing (6).

While Allen agrees that reason is constitutively impure, always intertwined with power (e.g., xiii f., 186 f.), and while she also sees Adorno's negative dialectics as one way for critical theory to understand and theorize this impurity of reason, she does not see it as the only possibility. As her (controversial) reading of Michel Foucault and Adorno shows, she allows

for multiple methods in critical theory as long as they respect the essential impurity of reason and the commitment to radical self-reflexivity that it necessitates (Vogelmann 2021a, 324–326). I suspect that Reynolds would disagree with her account of Adorno’s negative dialectics, as she downplays the dialectic part of it and thereby relates it closer to Foucault’s conception of a problematizing genealogy. Yet he agrees with the commitment of radical self-reflexivity, emphasizing it even more strongly than Allen does, for it is the “cultivation of reflexivity” (Reynolds 2021, 7) that grounds critique—not justifying normative principles.

II. The Lure of Self-Reflection

What does it mean to “ground” or to provide normative foundations for critique? As Reynolds notes, it means fulfilling a demand that Habermas prominently voiced. Self-critically examining his own tradition of critical theory, Habermas argued that the early members of the Frankfurt School did not sufficiently justify the normative yardsticks they used to measure society against to find it wanting. Thus, in *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1984, xxxix), he announces his aim to construct “a social theory concerned to validate its own critical standards.” Grounding critique in this sense therefore means explicating the normative principles or concepts that justify the criticisms of society as unjust, irrational, colonized by instrumental reason etc.

My point in rehearsing these well-known facts is that we should keep in mind that “grounding critique” is a highly specific theoretical practice and carries with it many philosophically ambitious presuppositions. Not the least among them is a specific conception of normativity.

The immediate function of Habermas’s demand, however, is to criticize those critical theories that do not fulfil it. It has since become a standard criticism of Adorno’s negative dialectic social theory that it gives no justification for the normative criteria which its critical judgements of contemporary society employ but offers only “aesthetic experience as a form of resistant consciousness” (Reynolds 2021, 7). Reynolds argues that this objection overlooks Adorno’s theoretical and practical efforts to secure the possibilities of a “cultivation of reflection” (8), an open-ended self-reflexivity that breaks out of the narrow confines of contemporary education as dominated by instrumental reason. To disrupt the logic of identity thinking and its reign over society, self-reflection must proceed differently. Reynolds reads Adorno’s remarks on the “essay as form” to provide a glimpse of the different form in which an open-ended reflexivity can be developed; precisely because it does not attempt to systematize all statements into one coherent whole but allows the fragments to conflict with each other, the essay “allows the expression of thoughts that are not yet possible but are neither merely fantastical images without foundation” (9).

Following this model, critical theory does not ground its critique in normative principles rationally justified by a philosophical system. Instead, it grounds its critique in a mode of judgement that already breaks with the prevailing logic of the negative social totality. (Reynolds also has a further thesis about grounding critique in basic human experiences, which I will consider below in section III). The open-ended self-reflection, that allows the

contradictions found in society to unfold in theory instead of paving them over with formal logic, is the method of negative dialectics, inasmuch as negative dialectics can be called a method at all.

Self-reflexivity certainly is important for critical theory. Yet my worry is that promoting it to grounding critique in a parallel fashion in which the justification of normative foundations grounds critique overburdens it. As grounds of critique, self-reflexivity is too individualistic and idealistic. Reynolds characterizes it primarily as an imperative directed at the individual to change her mind—whereas Adorno’s critical theory purports to show that the social-material conditions prevent even the existence of truly individual subjects (see Adorno 1969, this is also a dominant theme in Horkheimer’s work, e.g. in Horkheimer 2004 [1947], chapter IV). Although Reynolds seems to anticipate this objection, noting that Adorno’s efforts include a “sustained interdisciplinary program of social research” (7) and that the essay as a form of resistant consciousness “requires an openness to intellectual experience that outstrips the individual author” (9), he does not elaborate on these points. However, if critical theory indeed grounds critique on a defense of self-reflection that breaks with the prevailing logic of identity thinking, it would be of utmost importance to understand what social and material resources critical theory can enlist.

Social practices that further free and open-ended self-reflection need a material and social infrastructure to allow actors to take up the highly ambitious form of the essay as a model for thought. It does not seem enough to argue, as Reynolds does, that we can discern the task of a “lifelong educational process” (8) in negative outlines in Adorno’s writing. For the results of the social research by the early Frankfurt School emphasize how impossible a task that has become, and how quickly such advice can be captured by the (neo)liberal rhetoric of “lifelong learning.”

Indeed, it seems wrong to me that such a cultivation of self-reflexivity grounds the critique of the early Frankfurt School critical theory. First and foremost, it is the interdisciplinary materialistic research itself that underwrites their criticisms of society. After all, especially in its early days, critical theory was designed as “interdisciplinary materialism,” as a research program aiming to intertwine social sciences and philosophy in a novel form of theory directed against “traditional theory” (see especially Horkheimer 1993 [1935], Horkheimer 2002 [1937], but also Adorno 1977 [1973]). Although Reynolds is right that self-reflexivity is among the specific features of critical theory which distinguish it from traditional theory, in that critical theory is invariably charged to account for the social and material conditions of its own research practice (see Vogelmann 2021b), self-reflexivity here is a feature of theory not the individual, and it cannot ground critique in the same sense that normative foundations do.

III. Normativity: Perspective or Phenomenon?

Reynolds sees this, I think, because he also provides another argument: “For Adorno and Horkheimer, critical theory’s moral and political dimension rests on basic human experiences

which, they consistently argue, require no theoretical elaboration—such as the bodily experience of suffering and humankind’s hopeful striving for happiness” (3).

That basic human experiences like suffering need not be theoretically elaborated is a remarkable claim. Reynolds seems to have in mind aphorisms by Adorno like “We may not know what absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the human or humanity—but what the inhuman is we know very well indeed.” (Adorno 2001 [1996], 175) and “Woe speaks: Go.” (Adorno 1973 [1966], 203) Adorno’s rejection of explications of suffering is a tempting stance to take, given that many theoretical articulations tend to lose the force of the initial experience, making it debatable when it is constitutively not. Yet despite these merits, taking such a negativistic stance (for a defense, see Freyenhagen 2013) cannot ground critique in the way that “grounding” is demanded in the debate about the normative yardsticks of critique. If suffering—and especially social suffering, unless we take suffering to be unmediated by our social practices—is to play that role, then we must indeed explicate it, as Emmanuel Renault (2017 [2008]) demonstrates. Now, if I understand Reynolds correctly, his aim is actually different: He suggests that no grounding of critique, as it is meant in providing normative foundations, is necessary. On this point, I agree, but making the case why it is not necessary requires much more arguments and must begin with the concept of normativity itself. As I have argued elsewhere (Vogelmann 2021a, c), we should start by distinguishing between two usages of normativity: as a phenomenon *in* the world (i.e. there are prescriptive and/or evaluative phenomena) and as a perspective *on* the world (i.e. there is a normative dimension to all phenomena). The latter has its roots in 19th century Neo-Kantianism but has been revived and significantly developed during the last sixty years. Only when using normativity as a perspective on the world providing normative foundations for critique becomes unavoidable. Yet defending this distinction and thereby deflating “normativity” in its perspectival usage is extremely demanding; after all, it would significantly alter our picture of the world and of philosophy in its relation to the world. Critical theory would then be indeed no longer tied to the tiresome demand to justify its normative foundations but might gain the freedom to actually criticize the societies we live in. This would be a critical theory after my own heart, and it is close to Reynolds’s idea as well. Yet to develop it, we need to rework the methodology used in Frankfurt School critical theory, early and later, even negative dialectics, to begin anew the task of giving theory a form distinctively different from traditional theory.

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