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Rhetorical affects and critical intentions

A response to Ben Gregg

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In the mid-1970s at the height of the so-called “terrorist hunt” West German conservatives argued that Critical Theory from Horkheimer to Habermas was indirectly responsible for political terrorism because it corroded the rationality and legitimacy of existing society through its doctrines. The opponents of critical theory made it seem as if an unbroken logic led from rational criticism to political violence and terror. If I am not mistaken, in our days Critical Theory is accused of a new kind of terrorism – the “terrorism” of reason and of the rational. This kind of terrorism need not resort to action and to violence against things and persons to make its point. According to postmodernists like Richard Rorty and Jean-François Lyotard, the privileging of one language-game over others, the articulation of a “grand narrative” of modernity and Enlightenment, the insistence that critical thought reveal the normative principles in the name of which it speaks, are instances of the terrorism of the rational. Such a rationality does not allow the heteronomous, the discontinuous, the agonistic, in short, the diverse language-games and their small narratives to remain as they are and to enjoy their proper legitimacy.

Ben Gregg is certainly no postmodernist critic of critical theory and of Habermas. However, his assumption that any defense of the paradigm shift in critical theory from instrumental to communicative reason does “violence” to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition and to early critical theory is reminiscent of recent postmodernist denunciations of the terror of the rational. Gregg’s major discontent with my treatment of this paradigm shift is indicated by the rhetorical subtitle of his review: “Must a History of Philosophy be a Philosophy of History?” He identifies the “violence” that such a philosophy of history does to its object as follows: “The main

weakness of *Critique, Norm and Utopia* should by now be clear: it tends toward being a *Geschichtsphilosophie* with Habermas as the immanent telos of critical normative philosophy since Hegel.” If this were indeed the case, if my presentation of the tradition of critical theory triumphed with Habermas at the end as the new “World Spirit on horseback,” Gregg would be correct. The terrorism of the rational would then consist in viewing past developments in the critical Marxist tradition as so many paths leading to Habermas’s triumphant march. But this is a serious misrepresentation of my intentions in *Critique, Norm and Utopia* – serious enough indeed to have occasioned this response.

Gregg can accuse me of presenting the history of theories as a crypto-philosophy of history because he confuses *the method of presentation* I follow with *substantive* assumptions about the philosophy of history that I *denounce*. At the beginning of his review Gregg identifies my methodology as “the presentation of the history of theories from a systematic point of view,” and describes this procedure as “the reconstruction of continuities and breaks in the ‘evolution’ of theories within a given intellectual tradition . . . toward identifying systematic problems and developing alternative strategies to overcome its immanent problems, rescuing a thinker’s intentions, now reinterpreted, from a framework precluding their realization.” Although this is a fair characterization of the method of presentation I follow, the phrase the “‘evolution’ of theories,” can be – and I think in Gregg’s case has been – seriously misleading. Such evolution would imply that traditions of thought were more continuous and homogeneous than they in fact are, and that a later theory is in some sense an “advance” or an improvement over an “earlier” one. Although I believe that “learning processes” in some weak sense take place in theoretical traditions (Critical Theorists have learned from Marx’s critique of Hegel), and that a future theory, because it attempts to surpass the mistakes of the earlier ones, can register a gain in rationality in this respect (Habermas’s treatment of the problem of ethics, when compared to Horkheimer and Adorno, involves such a learning process), my goal in *Critique, Norm and Utopia* was not to argue that Hegel and Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer were theorists of communicative rationality *malgré eux*. My aim was not to place these thinkers along an evolutionary continuum in some Popperian “third world” (would it not be silly to argue that just because it is later in time *Negative Dialectics* surpasses the *Phenomenology of Spirit*?), but to show the existence of tensions, problems, and aporias in their thought resulting from their subscription to the work model of action and the philosophy of the subject. As I note in the introduction, “From Marx to Horkheimer, the vi-

sion of a demiurge-like mankind, producing externality, unfolding its capacities in this process, and destined to emancipation by appropriating its own alienated forces, dominates. . . . In Hegel's critique of Kantian moral philosophy, in Marx's emphasis on concrete, sensuous finitude and individuals in social relations, and in Adorno's critique of identity philosophies, one can discover traces of a more intersubjectively oriented and pluralistic conception of self, society, and politics. To develop the full implications of these scattered elements and insights, however, the shortcomings of the work model of action and of the philosophy of the subject must be seen more clearly."

Because my purpose was to reveal the tension between these various strands in the tradition of Critical Theory from Hegel to Habermas, and to play off against the philosophy of the subject aspects of a more intersubjectively centered and pluralistic conception of self, society, and politics, I myself characterized this method through the model of Gadamerian dialogue, and warned explicitly at the beginning of my interpretation of Habermas in chapter seven against the teleological and evolutionary history of theories that Gregg accuses me of following (cf. 224–225). "The reconstruction of the history of theories," I write in the preface, "proceeds like a dialogue in which one asks a question, seeks to comprehend whether this question is meaningful to the other, listens and reformulates the answer of the other, and in light of this answer rearticulates one's original position. It is in this spirit that I have approached the problem of the normative foundations of critical theory" (x).

Admittedly, there is a distinction between the *intentions* of an author and their *execution* or *concretization*. It is up to the readers to judge whether in this respect *Critique, Norm and Utopia* has been successful in upholding the model of dialogue it evokes. It is the critic's responsibility, however, to inform the reader of an author's *intentions* and to distinguish them from his own evaluation of the author's success or failure in their *execution*.

That Gregg fails in this task, that he cannot distinguish between his largely negative evaluation of the Habermasian program and my own analysis of the paradigm shift in critical theory, is indicated by the following: the concepts of "norm" and "utopia" that figure in the title of the book and that describe the two visions of politics and emancipation between which critical theorists vacillate are not mentioned by Gregg at all. But the major argument in *Critique, Norm and Utopia* is that while the "politics of fulfillment" (norm) continues the universalist promise of

bourgeois revolutions in demanding justice, equality, civil rights, democracy, and publicity, the “politics of transfiguration” (utopia) continues the tradition of early socialist, communitarian, and anarchist movements seeking qualitatively new relations among self, nature, and others. After establishing the presence of both visions of emancipatory politics in Marx’s work, I argue that Habermas’s “paradigm shift” in critical theory emphasizes the politics of fulfillment at the risk of repressing the moment of utopia or transfiguration.¹

I would like to think that this critique of the loss of the utopian dimension of earlier Critical Theory does not only amount to a “small change” in the Habermasian paradigm as Gregg suggests. For some time now, sympathetic critics of Habermas have been forming what Joel Whitebook has aptly described as a “loyal opposition.” Like Albrecht Wellmer, Thomas McCarthy, and Richard Bernstein, I see a tension between the transcendental and the historically and contextually situated aspects of Habermas’s thought. The cost, however, of becoming overly transcendental, in my opinion, is not only epistemic or methodological, but also normative and political. The dominance of the transcendental approach represses the utopian moment in Critical Theory. This utopian perspective proceeds from our finite, historical, and embodied existence to project moments of solidarity and happiness among “concrete others,” and does not rest satisfied with the vision of reciprocal recognition among the abstract, “generalized others” of transcendental reason.

Because he misjudges the extent to which I want to save the utopian intentions of early Critical Theory and to criticize Habermas in their light, Gregg also miscalculates my interpretation of new social movements. First, he accuses me of deviating from Habermas’s views (as if this were a criticism); second, he maintains that in my scheme new social movements become the new “subject” of history. While the first point is one that I myself address, the second is simply false. I state very clearly at several points in the text (233 ff; 251), that I doubt whether the theory of the “colonization of the lifeworld” alone can explain the rise and significance of new social movements. Habermas fails to appreciate that groups organized in peace, ecology, women’s, alternative, and other movements are not only or even primarily defending the lifeworld against capitalism and bureaucracy but that they are also creating new principles of politics, and putting the systems of power and money on the defensive. (The success of neoconservatism in the last number of years, I would argue, is not evidence to the contrary, because neoconservatives defend what they take to be corroding under the attack of these

movements plus the damaging ideology of the “adversary intelligentia.”) I characterize this new political principle as the creation of a “community of needs and solidarity.”

That I see these movements as careers of a utopian promise by no means suggests that I see them as the solution to the riddle of history. One of the most interesting aspects of these movements is their self-limiting character; unlike the bourgeois and workers’ movements of the last century, they do not speak in the name of the social totality, but are aware of “difference” and regard this as a positive moment. By contrast, the philosophy of the subject always searches for a particular group, be it the working class, the Third World, women, and the Party whose particularity would represent universality. New social movements, or at least the non-fundamentalists among them, are aware that there is no single spot in the social structure that privileges those who occupy it with a vision of the social totality, and that this is not lamentable. Gregg is simply wrong therefore in his claim that for me these new social movements replace the revolutionary subject in the traditional philosophy of the subject. What we learn from these movements is that there is no unified subject of history, but that there are at the most different, struggling collectivities, grouped around eminently fragile and revisable normative conceptions of identity, self-limiting but experimental and inspirational in their search for new ways of interacting with inner and outer nature, new ways of organizing our living and public spaces, and new ways of conceptualizing and living in peace and security. Whether the paradigm shift from the critique of instrumental reason to that of communicative rationality in Critical Theory will allow us to conceptualize the “newness” of these movements better, as well as delivering us normative standards in light of which to judge them, is a question I leave open in my book.

It seems clear to me that there are compelling reasons of a theoretical and political nature at the present to endorse this paradigm shift in critical theory, while strengthening those moments of situated and contextual critique against transcendental flights from the concrete. We have to remember the lessons of Enlightenment universalism without forgetting those utopian aspirations of the past that have failed. The purpose of *Critique, Norm and Utopia* is to argue that a critical social theory of the present is only viable insofar as it can do justice both to norm and to utopia. My aim certainly was not, as Gregg suggests, to write a panegyric suggesting that the theory program of a single individual was the implicit telos of an entire tradition.

Notes

1. Cf. however the essay on “Die Krise des Wohlfahrtsstaates und die Erschöpfung utopischer Energien” in *Die Neue Unübersichtlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985) 141–167; English translation by Phillips Jacobs in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* as “The New Obscurity,” which was published after my book had gone to press, and in which Habermas himself laments the exhaustion of utopian energies in the welfare state. This essay indicates that many of the criticisms I raise about the absence of utopia in Habermas’s thought is a concern he himself has felt the need to address in recent years.