

Foucault, Gramsci and Critical Theory – Remarks on their Relationship

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Bringing Marx, Gramsci and Foucault together is not so common in Germany and this is reflected in the limited number of scholars who do such work. Most critical intellectuals who refer to one of these names usually exclude the other two. For example, those who consider Marx from the perspective of the so-called new reading of Marx (*die Neue Marx Lektüre*) show but little interest in most of the post-Marx-debates and would regard them as more or less misleading, ideological, and insufficiently radical. The same neglect holds for Gramsci, who is often seen by Marx scholars as the theoretician of the 'historical compromise'. Likewise, Foucault is regarded as incompatible with their concern to reformulate and to restore Marx' theory. For those refer to both Marx and Gramsci, Foucault is often seen as an unwitting or even deliberate supporter of neo-liberalism. Similarly, analysts of Foucault's work obviously do not believe that the kind of analyses inspired by Marx – critical political economy, state theory, or critical theory of ideology – could contribute to "governmentality studies" or a critical history of the present. Things become even complicated if we bring Critical Theory into the picture.

Critical theory, in its specific meaning of the older Critical Theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, key figures in the founding generation of the Institute of Social Research, was envisaged as a critical and self-critical reflection on the basic concepts and political and cultural implications of the work of Marx and the whole Enlightenment tradition. Critical Theory was understood as the reflexive elaboration and actualization of Marx's theory under the conditions of late capitalism, i.e., a period marked by the defeat of emancipatory movements. This defeat required that all the assumptions and concepts of this intellectual and political tradition had to undergo a critical examination. Marx and Critical Theory itself were understood as steps in the history of the Enlightenment from its origins in the 18th century onwards, including Rousseau, Voltaire, Helvetius, Holbach, Kant and Hegel. The aim of this tradition was emancipation through a rational organization of all aspects of social relations – rational in the sense that all human beings will participate in

producing and shaping their world as a whole through their own rationality, i.e., their capacity to appropriate the world through labour.

As a consequence of their argumentation in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno dismissed the idea of creating a totality on the basis of rational organized work. In their eyes, it was obvious that the most civilized countries of modern capitalism with all their scientific and technological know-how had become totalitarian states – and that this did not happen by accident but for inherent and systematic reasons. Enlightenment in itself leads to totalitarianism because it aims to control everything from above. It wants to establish a totality into which everything fits and finds its place in a teleological manner. Particularities are ignored and neglected. This totality is itself based on a division of labor that privileges a few persons with the social knowledge and the power to control the means of production. The dominant groups argue that all this is necessary for the sake of the survival of all. They claim to organize the social totality on behalf of the common good (*Gemeinwohl*) and not in their own private interests. To ensure their reproduction, societies as well as individuals must comply with the laws of nature, society and, above all, the market. From the perspective of Critical Theory, the technological progress, growing wealth and increasing consumption of capitalist societies no longer legitimized domination and the inherited social division of labor and would, therefore prove unsustainable. Thus theory was becoming a dangerous activity for the ruling class because it could lead to members of the subaltern classes as well as critical theoreticians to understand that a free and rationally self-organized mode of societalization (*Vergesellschaftung*) had become possible. Hence the ruling classes would reject theory itself as the only rational way to understand what is happening. Science and knowledge were reduced to a purely positivist-technical disposition of things and words; and meaning-making was subordinated to the control of mass media and cultural industry.

Against all this Critical Theory claimed both to defend theoretical practice and truth and to criticize the concepts of reason and totality. Emancipation should no longer entail the creation of a totality – all the traditional concepts of Enlightenment such as totality, equality, freedom, and justice should be overcome through a determined negation. Yet this critical perspective led

Horkheimer and Adorno to believe that they were a kind of vanguard of contemporary critical thought representing the most progressive stage of Enlightenment and social criticism. They did not expect to find anything interesting in the work of other critical theorists and were not interested in collaborating with them, seeing most critical intellectuals as committed to traditional concepts like alienation, totality, dialectics or else to more or less positivistic ways of thinking.

There is much criticism of the assumptions of older Critical Theory. The idea of late capitalism is obviously implausible; it lacks a concept of democracy and the nature of the welfare state; it derives the autonomy of culture and science from commodity exchange and the logic of equivalence. Those who followed up this line of argumentation showed no interest in the work of Gramsci or Foucault and even ignored most parts of Marx's work. They were interested in the derivation of the commodity form and the self-valorization of capital as an abstract system of reproduction but they neglected the contradictions of capitalist reproduction together with the specific historical forms of class struggle and domination. Some, like Jürgen Habermas, concluded that a paradigmatic shift was required to re-found Critical Theory in the guise of a practical philosophy. Such scholars discerned some similarity between, on the one side, Horkheimer and Adorno and, on the other, the work of Foucault. All three criticized the concept of reason, were inclined to pessimism, analyzed matters in system-theoretical terms, and seemed to ignore subjectivity, norms, freedom of action and democratic participation. Foucault in particular, by virtue of his references to Nietzsche, was said to be weakening barriers against irrationalism.

Do Critical Theory and Gramsci have anything in common with Foucault? Gramsci and first generation Critical Theorists were both sympathetic to the workers' council movement of the 1920s and also accept that our ability to understand the world is rooted in the fact that we also produce that world. This idea goes back to the tradition of Vico and was elaborated in Marx' and Engels' *German Ideology*. It emphasizes, in contrast to Habermas's misinterpretation of Marx, that such production goes beyond labour to include speaking, governing, having sex, begetting children, struggling and revolting.

The theoretical concepts we are using are practical ones, because they are collectively developed means of interacting with the social world, itself already constituted by the comprehensive practices of our ancestors. Hence concepts are always our concepts, inserted in a specific historical constellation of collectively appropriating and transforming the relations between human beings and their relations to nature. This is one aspect of what Gramsci calls a historical bloc. Truth always has a temporal core. Although historically relative, it has unavoidable binding effects “on us” – because there is no neutral outside from which we could compare our historical understanding with an ahistorical truth. All concepts are therefore constituted in and by the social praxis. In the absence of direct access to the real world we must analyze all the concepts people use in their social life. Concepts and theories are social relations, material practices that transform the world.

Foucault had little interest in a panoramic view of the history of philosophy that tend to give the arguments of master thinkers the status of eternal and universal truth in opposition to the everyday world of intellectual social relations in which people live, dismissed as common sense or doxa. He was also little interested in the idea of appropriating the world through certain modes of work, which he feared would lead to the pitfall of a humanistic theory of a reified world that is the alienated product of past work. Nonetheless he argued, like Gramsci and Horkheimer/Adorno, that theory is a social practice that can be an instrument and a weapon. In his work he contributed more than Horkheimer and Adorno ever did to a better understanding of concepts like ‘author’, ‘book’, ‘writing’, ‘the institutional position of a speaker’, ‘scientific discipline’, and ‘intellectual’ as modes of establishing the separation of intellectual from manual work and at the same time disciplining it by subordinating under specific practical forms. Foucault rejected hermeneutics, the attempt to find the meaning of a text within its deep structure, and demonstrated that writing, reading, interpreting are historically determined modes of intellectual practice that exercise power through the oppression or exclusion of other forms of knowledge and knowing from below. In this respect it is clear that Foucault’s analysis fits into the framework of a Gramscian analysis of civil society. For Gramsci, the analysis of civil society is one aspect of the integral state (i.e., political society + civil society) includes the analysis

of the intellectuals, the role of theories as organizing practices of collective shared convictions and beliefs. A world view is elaborated and exists in concrete forms like newspapers and journals, publishing houses and bookshops, schools and universities, think tanks and business schools, films and styles of music, churches and sports.

Conceiving his work as a contribution to a tool box of useful instruments for the analysis and the fight against specific power relations Foucault rejected the idea of critical theory as a theory of a social totality. Foucault was anxious to avoid objectifying individuals or social relations and thereby copying the practices that he was criticizing. This is why he called himself an “empiricist”. Nevertheless, remembering that what his project for more than ten years involved concrete and very detailed analyses of power in several fields, it does seem that he was preparing something like a theory of power – as he himself conceded.

It is also obvious that Foucault needed more general and theoretical concepts like the state or power because he would not otherwise even know what kind of research he should undertake or where to look. Reference to a concept of class struggle appeared necessary to him: not all struggles are class struggles but the notion of ‘class struggle’ would still guarantee the intelligibility of grand strategies, articulating local powers. Foucault called himself an empiricist and also a nominalist but he did not hesitate to use more general and theoretical concepts where this was required by his research object.

In the seventies we can discern signs of convergence between Foucault and Marx. He was seen as a colleague and former student of Louis Althusser and committed to a general framework of research on the topic of the autonomy of ideology and knowledge. Of course, Foucault did not undertake a critical political economy. He rejected a certain authoritarian orthodoxy and suggests the historical obsolescence of Marx: “Don’t talk to me about Marx any more! I never want to hear anything about that man again.” But at the same time and again and again he stressed that all that he was doing -- writing history -- occurred in the horizon of Marx, claiming that he was often referring on Marx without explicitly mentioning it: “When a physicist writes a work of physics, does he feel it necessary to quote Newton and Einstein?” Foucault focused on

struggles over knowledge, science and truth. Thus he contributed to a critical theory of culture, enlarging the scope of the analysis and transforming the methodology. Culture was seen as one of the modes of class struggle. People could be seen as exploited and subordinated not only by the control of their work but also by and through their cultural practices. In the perspective of Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht or Theodor Adorno, culture was the barbarian triumph of the ruling classes – domination includes also the power and the right to define what culture and legitimized knowledge is. Foucault extended the analysis of culture to the practices of science and knowledge. In his perspective, there was too much discussion about classes and too little on what 'struggle' means.

Foucault rejected 'Marxism' because he was partly disappointed by the student movement in '68 and the growing orthodoxy that made Marx appear ridiculous. He discerned even in this anti-authoritarian inspired movement the same authoritarian trends on a minor scale that had already damaged Marxism and the socialist tradition. He argued that it makes no sense to defend Marx's texts against historical abuse compared to the urgency of showing how these texts had informed authoritarian practices that led to tribunals, prisons, tortures, and the use of sciences like medicine or psychiatry to punish dissenting intellectuals. The intention is very similar to that of Critical Theory: an analysis of the project of Enlightenment including all those concepts representing the aim of emancipation itself – not in order to reject them but to reformulate and renew them to arrive at new strategies. One hint that Foucault gives us in this regard is his reference to the concept of socialist governmentality as a means of limiting the exercise of power. This is what he proposed to learn from the neoliberals and their governmentality: how they organize the limitation of power.

In interviews given in the late 1970s and early 1980 Foucault commented on Critical Theory. He seemed to be glad not having read Horkheimer and Adorno for otherwise, he argued, he could not have achieved what he did because they already covered much of the same ground. Despite some similarities to Critical Theory, however, Foucault is rather critical because it is one the most important representatives of Freudo-Marxism. He rejected this in

Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*: power explained in psychoanalytic terms as the authority of the law of the father, the internalization, the conformism, the derivation from equivalential exchange, the state as the beloved oppressor – in sum, what Foucault is criticizing as the repressive hypothesis.

Both approaches have something in common with Gramsci's notion of the law of large numbers. For Critical Theory that means the conformism of large numbers of individuals institutionalized by the cultural industry and mass consumption since the 1930s: film, cars, fashion, magazines, cosmetics, music, sports – all this is becoming part of the circuit of capital and just performing it. Gramsci had in mind economies of scale, the aggregation effects of production and consumption or the division of labour that rests on certain proportions of the population: each enlarged cycle of reproduction of capital needs proportionally larger amounts of skilled and unskilled work, raw materials, energy, transport etc. Capitalist reproduction is itself the result of non-organic, non-rational experiences of those flows of human beings, materials, knowledge or money. For example: let us say each year about four million Germans travel as tourists to Spain. As a consequence, seats in airplanes are booked, airplanes and staff are organized, hotels and apartments are built, workers are hired for service, and food is produced. All this is based on former experiences and the expectation that the four millions probably will come again, otherwise many investments are lost. These entire movements of large numbers reflect what Marx called the ideal average of the logic of capital.

For Gramsci the law of large numbers – in contrast to Critical Theory – also has a positive meaning, because he expected social conformism to be organized by the left through hegemonic struggles. Foucault's argument is consistent with this but he wanted to analyze how the normalization of individuals' attitudes occurs. His analysis is situated in the framework of an analysis of power. Foucault distinguishes three forms or modes of power. The first is violence, oppression, the police, the law, the courts. Although Foucault very often speaks about this mode of power, he surprisingly devoted little attention to it. The important point in his argument seems to be that power cannot be derived from state power or from law. He claims to be concerned

with the technologies of power. These cut across the distinction of base and superstructure, of economy and state, and circulate among different practices of power constituting the fields of society and state.

The second mode of power is disciplinary. Through the micro-physics of power, the technologies of the political anatomy of the body, the individual is trained in everyday life in school, in the military, in the factory. Here Foucault deepens Marx's insight that the reproduction of capital is based on the "dull compulsion of economic relations" – an expression that Marx never specified. The decisive point for Foucault is that disciplinary power normalizes individuals and their behavior through spatial structures, temporal rhythms, and body movements. Individuals are benchmarked, must fulfill certain norms, and their behavior is always measured in terms of conformity or deviation. Where it deviates, it must be punished.

There is a third mode of power, namely, governmentality or bio-power. He is not very clear about the relation of these two terms. The concepts are intended to generalize the analysis of the microphysics of power on a more general scale, such as the state, and to demonstrate that the latter is the hegemonic effect of a series of power practices. Once constituted and reproduced by power technologies, the state itself – as one of those technologies – may produce its own effects. Governmental power is a very different way of normalizing people and this means that 'normalization' acquires a new meaning. In contrast with the normativism of disciplinary power, governmental power takes account of likely 'deviations' from the norms. Disciplinary power is not flexible enough, it is too rigid. But power must also deal with the surprise events and not interpret them as threats. Contingency has to be taken seriously: people become sick, they die or migrate, they refuse to attend work, drink too much alcohol or suffer an accident; prices will fall or rise, there will a lack of food or a surplus. All this may be statistically observed, regularities may be found, short and long waves may be expected. Governmental or bio-power targets those collective processes as objects to be governed: "the economy", "the society", "health", "the city", "the state", "migration", "democracy" Correspondingly the human sciences as economy, sociology, political science emerge to observe, count,

anticipate mass behavior. The aim is not to oppress those individual or collective actions but to avoid wild swings by moderating the amplitude of deviations and to normalize the behavior of large numbers of people. Thus a German sociologist, Erwin Scheuch, has suggested that it is *normal* for any modern industrial society for 14 percent of its population to comprise rightwing *extremists* but more is a danger, presupposing a Gaussian normal distribution of political attitudes. This argument simultaneously defines a specific attitude on the left and right ends of the curve as abnormal (or extreme) and yet normalizes a certain percentage of such attitudes by regarding it as non-threatening to modern societies. Following Foucault, not only is the economy construed as a target of normalization and regulation but also society as a whole. What is called Fordism could be seen as a governmentality of scale whereas the current neoliberal reorganization of capitalist societies could be understood as a governmentality of scope. It is a new mode of domination, domination by and through contingency. Social practices are differentiated, insulated and counted by statistical methods and procedures to constitute risk communities to govern them in new ways: they should recognize and acknowledge their risks, pay more and change their way of life. The current field of governmentality studies is less concerned with governmentality in a strict Foucauldian sense than with discipline, conflating some ideas about the microphysics of power with those of its macrophysics.

What brings Foucault close to Critical Theory is that he conceives society and the state as ensembles of objects, constituted by social practices. They are the result of totalizing projects to govern and dominate the subaltern classes as passive objects and masses. The aim of emancipation is not to constitute just another society or another form of state but to look for different ways to constitute social cooperation on a global scale. 'Society' has been seen as a (governmental) mode of sociality organized since the middle of 18th century by a particular group, the modern bourgeois class, to reproduce its mode of life by expanding and superposing it on other modes of life to reorganize all other social relations in the same way. Foucault, like Adorno and Horkheimer, analyzes power in a very radical way in case some unexplored ways of living and social relations become the starting point for new forms of power und domination. Both, Critical Theory and Foucault were not just concerned to put

into question this or that mode of exercising power but, more radically, to call into question "*political reason*" itself. For this leads to the exercise of power in and through institutions and technologies like prisons and schools and factories and psychiatric practices. This prompted both the older Critical Theory and Foucault to reject classical emancipatory ideas rooting back in the humanistic and idealistic tradition those as the ideas of a non-alienated, self-realized individual. Adorno claimed that every socio-psychological model of the emancipated individual should be abandoned. Foucault was convinced that emancipation means to liberate the individual from any bonds to its identity, conceiving the individual subject itself as the effect of disciplinary and inquisitorial power to constitute an individual by registering, observing, educating and normalizing it, giving to it a personal history, guaranteeing its identity. Emancipation means for Foucault as for Adorno that we have to create something new.