

Critique & Praxis



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The Primacy of Critique and Praxis

To change the world: The ambition of critical philosophy since its inception in the nineteenth century has always been to transform human existence.¹ Not just to make the world more safe and secure for private possessions or for the free pursuit of self-interest, as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, or Adam Smith aspired to earlier. Not just to make it more rational, self-conscious, or orderly, with Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, or Max Weber. Nor simply to make men more virtuous or life more pleasurable, as Aristotle, Epicurus, Seneca, and the ancients envisaged millennia before. But rather, to create a more just and equal society, with less domination and social differential, and to materialize the opportunity for each and every one of us to flourish and achieve our greatest potential. To realize a world of equal citizens, in which all human beings can fulfill their talents and aspirations, in which all are nurtured, educated, and cared for generously and respectfully by each other, tending not only to their dreams and ambitions, but also humbly to everyone else's.

“The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways,” Karl Marx wrote in his notebooks in 1845, “the point, however, is to *change* it.”² These now-famous words sealed the birth certificate of critical philosophy, although many had foreshadowed it earlier, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Levellers, Saint Francis, or even, on some readings, the prophetic traditions long before. What they all shared—and would share with later critical theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Michel Foucault, Angela Davis, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—was the ambition to infuse the world with the values of compassion, equality, solidarity, autonomy, and social justice. To turn the contemplative philosophical tradition into a practice of emancipation. To push thought in the direction of action and toward human liberation. To convert theory into practice.

From antiquity, philosophers had conceived of the two—theory and practice—as two fundamentally different ways of living, different ways of being human. The ancient Greeks referred to them as *theoria*, meaning contemplation, and *praxis*, the ethical and political form of being. The former, *theoria*, predominantly involved understanding and comprehension—in essence, knowing. It was oriented toward wisdom. The latter, *praxis*, revolved around activity, action, performance—in

essence, doing. It was geared toward proper behavior in ethical and political life. For the ancients, these represented two different modes of engaging the world—two among others, *poiesis*, or artistic creation, being another.

These categories helped shape human experience ever since. They entered our common lexicon and structured our way of being.³ Over the centuries, philosophers continued to interrogate and explore the nexus of theory and praxis. Early theologians drew on these categories in their struggle to square contemplative faith with works of charity. Medieval scholars explored the possibility of practical applications of theoretical knowledge. Enlightenment philosophers—from Descartes through the German idealists—tilted the field toward reason and rationality, toward theory and away from practice, generating new debates over the relation between mind and body, between private reason and public action, and over the self-actualization of the human spirit.⁴

Philosophers, almost by definition—by the very etymology of their creed as “lovers of wisdom”—naturally tended to favor theory, contemplation, and inquiry over action. This orientation traced far back in history. In the *First Alcibiades* and Plato’s *Statesman*, Socrates reenacted the age-old preference for knowledge over practice. Confronting young men who wanted to live the life of praxis rather than contemplation, Socrates quickly made them realize that they did not actually know that much about doing justice or governing others, and that they first needed to gain knowledge. Socrates convinced them to know themselves first, giving philosophical expression to the ancient Delphic maxim *gnōthi seauton*, “know thyself.” Politics in practice, it turns out, is a skill that requires a *technē*, a technique, a craftsmanship—a set of knowledges. Like the captain of a ship or the shepherd of a flock, the political practitioner must first acquire knowledge. There are skills to be learned and knowledge to be had. There must be wisdom first—which, naturally, pushed the inquiry back to the realm of contemplation. It returned the young men of praxis to Socrates’ discussion of justice from the *Republic*. Praxis, it turns out, must defer to true wisdom.

It was against this tendency, continually replicated throughout the ages and especially stark in the modern rationalist tradition from Descartes to Kant to Hegel, that critical philosophers in the nineteenth century struggled to invert the relationship and correct the imbalance—the Left Hegelians first among them, as so strikingly encapsulated in Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*.⁵ The second thesis: “The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question.” The eighth: “Social life is essentially *practical*.” And, then, of course, the eleventh.

With his bold language and clear vision, Marx epitomized the critical turn in philosophy. It was at the heart of his philosophical and personal quest for human emancipation, above and beyond simply ensuring civil and political rights. It was

the basis, first, of Marx turning idealism into materialism so that the motor of history would no longer be the evolution of reason or the rationalization of society, but rather the material contradictions in capitalism that would ultimately lead to the emancipation of all women and men; and second, of his turning classical political economy into an analysis of the crises of capital accumulation. In both periods, the young and the mature Marx inaugurated a critical turn in philosophy by attempting to convert the *contemplative* tradition into a *practice* of emancipation.

Yet Marx was by no means alone in his ambition to convert philosophy into praxis. Waves of critical theorists took on the mantle enthusiastically. Rosa Luxemburg propelled the analysis of capital accumulation further, toward a theory of radical democracy, and in the process enacted her own philosophical commitments into revolutionary praxis. Max Horkheimer demonstrated how critical theorists, themselves the product of their own historical conditions, seek to transform their society: Critical theory “never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such,” Horkheimer declared; “its goal is man’s emancipation from slavery.”⁶ Hannah Arendt privileged the *vita activa* in her study *The Human Condition* before turning, only in later years, to the contemplative realm in *The Life of the Mind*. Frantz Fanon transformed his philosophical ambitions into a revolutionary practice and advocated for an anticolonial war of liberation. Jean-Paul Sartre privileged praxis as well, serving as prosecutor and judge at popular tribunals while searching for a method for praxis in his writings; in the colonial context, Sartre also embraced revolution.⁷ Foucault wrote *Discipline and Punish* “for users, not readers,” as he famously said—for educators, wardens, magistrates, and conscientious objectors.⁸ Davis reoriented her philosophical commitments toward an abolitionist practice.⁹ Butler developed a theory of gender performativity with the normative aim and political goal, in her own words, to “let the lives of gender and sexual minorities become more possible and more livable.”¹⁰ Chantal Mouffe confronted “the sterile academic debate” to advocate for a praxis of left populism.¹¹ Sara Ahmed issued a killjoy manifesto and survival kit to offer practical tools to live a feminist life.¹²

The object of critical philosophy “is not simply the theory of emancipation,” Horkheimer emphasized in 1937; “it is the practice of it as well.”¹³ This ambition unfolded in a variety of ways and under myriad rubrics, from debates over “dirty hands” in the postwar years, to privileging distribution over recognition (or vice versa), to calls for the “unity” of theory and praxis.¹⁴

Yet a series of historical setbacks, failures, and catastrophes during the twentieth century led critical philosophy to beat retreat from its practical ambitions. These

seismic shifts in history—the rise of fascism and the Holocaust, the gulag archipelago and collapse of Soviet communism, the eclipse of the student and worker revolts of May 1968, the hegemonic emergence of global neoliberalism—all chastened the critical impulse and pushed critical theory into a safer, epistemological direction. Safer, at least, for philosophers and critical thinkers. Critical theory took an epistemological detour and moved away from praxis.

Max Horkheimer's own trajectory is undoubtedly illustrative. Before the war, and even at first in exile at Columbia University in New York City, Horkheimer vigorously embraced, in his own words, "the unity of theory and practice." Writing from his institute in exile in 1937, Horkheimer extolled "the idea of a theory which becomes a genuine force, consisting in the self-awareness of the subjects of a great historical revolution." This, he maintained, was something that traditional philosophers simply could not grasp because of their adherence to "the Cartesian dualism of thought and being." The mind-body dichotomy prevented traditional philosophers from comprehending the unity of theory and practice: "Reflecting on themselves men see themselves only as on-lookers, passive participants in a mighty process which may be foreseen but not modified." The resulting passivity thwarted traditional intellectuals from thinking of themselves as agents of change. By contrast, Horkheimer portrayed the critical theorist as one who enlightened and guided the masses—who engaged in praxis. Critical intellectuals thus played a pivotal role in helping the masses recognize and activate their interests. They were the ones who could pierce the veil of false consciousness. They had a "real function," Horkheimer wrote: to facilitate "the historical process of proletarian emancipation."¹⁵

By the end of the war and faced with the horror of the Holocaust, however, Horkheimer retreated from praxis. He prefaced his book *Eclipse of Reason*—a set of lectures he delivered at Columbia in the spring of 1944—by emphasizing that he "is not trying to suggest anything like a program of action."¹⁶ Horkheimer emphasized (writing as he did in the third person), "On the contrary, he believes that the modern propensity to translate every idea into action, or into active abstinence from action, is one of the symptoms of the present cultural crisis: action for action's sake is in no way superior to thought for thought's sake, *and is perhaps even inferior to it.*"¹⁷ The experience of the war utterly fractured the potential unity of theory and praxis. The "core of dialectical theory," Horkheimer would now declare, is "the basic difference between the ideal and the real, between theory and practice."¹⁸ Horkheimer concluded *Eclipse of Reason* on the following note: "This age needs no added stimulus to action. Philosophy must not be turned into propaganda, even for the best possible purpose.... The concentrated energies necessary for reflection must not be prematurely drained into the channels of activist or nonactivist programs."¹⁹

Horkheimer was, at this point, at the zenith of the dialectic of enlightenment and eclipse of reason—distrustful, to the maximum degree, of man's claims to progress. The position he took, in consequence, was decidedly *anti-praxis*: "Today even outstanding scholars confuse thinking with planning," he emphasized. "Shocked by social injustice and by hypocrisy in its traditional religious garb, they propose to wed ideology to reality, or, as they prefer to say, to bring reality closer to our heart's desire." That effort, however, was doomed to failure, Horkheimer maintained: "Philosophical theory itself cannot bring it about that either the barbarizing tendency or the humanistic outlook should prevail in the future." No, do not count on critical philosophy to guide praxis; it should chasten, rather than encourage, action and planning.²⁰

The action imperative repelled Theodor Adorno as well, perhaps with even greater intensity. In the aftermath of the student revolts of 1968, Adorno stressed the utter contradiction of theory and practice. The tradition of critical philosophy, Adorno maintained in his "Marginalia on Theory and Praxis," was not one of unity, but of dialectical contradiction between theory and practice. Marx himself had offered "no program for action" in *Capital* and "by no means surrendered himself to praxis," Adorno remonstrated.²¹ In his own works, Adorno professed—in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *The Authoritarian Personality*—there was no praxis intended: those books "were written without practical intentions," he declared. Adorno attacked the "error of the primacy of praxis." He further decried "the question 'what is to be done?'" as an "automatic reflex to every critical thought before it is fully expressed, let alone comprehended." "It recalls the gesture of someone demanding your papers," Adorno wrote, scathingly.²²

In this, Foucault too ultimately agreed—one of the few instances of substantial overlap with Horkheimer and Adorno. In the late 1970s, after a period of engaged militancy and confronted with the perceived failure, or at least fatigue, of post-1968 protest movements, Foucault distanced himself from the praxis imperative—at least in contrast to his earlier involvement in the prison abolitionist movement, the *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (GIP), in 1970–1971; to his more marxisant period in 1972–1973;²³ or, for that matter, to his engagement with the French Communist Party in 1950–1952.²⁴ In an interview with the psychiatrist David Cooper and others published in 1977, when asked whether, after criticism, there could be "a stage at which we might propose something?" Foucault carefully demurred:

My position is that it is not up to us to propose. As soon as one "proposes"—one proposes a vocabulary, an ideology, which can only have effects of domination. What we have to present are instruments and tools that people might find useful. By forming groups specifically to make these analyses, to wage these struggles, by

using these instruments or others: this is how, in the end, possibilities open up.

But if the intellectual starts playing once again the role that he has played for a hundred and fifty years—that of prophet, in relation to what “must be,” to what “must take place”—these effects of domination will return and we shall have other ideologies, functioning in the same way.²⁵

For Foucault, the action imperative had become not only a critical contradiction, but a dangerous proposition—one that reproduces ideology and domination. To have to answer the question “What is to be done?” was disciplinary, not emancipatory. The role of the critical philosopher was instead to craft ideas for others to deploy, as instruments or tools, if they deemed them useful. By the late 1970s, praxis was reserved for political actors, not philosophers—this was further reinforced, for Foucault, by the political backlash he received to his writings on the Iranian Revolution in 1978–1979. As Foucault noted at the end of his interview with Cooper, “It is simply in the struggle itself and through it that positive conditions emerge.”²⁶ It is the praxis of militants, as opposed to that of critical philosophers, that opens possibilities.

And in later years, paradoxically, the closer Foucault got to forms of practice—to the practices of the self—the more contemplative his philosophy appeared.²⁷ In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* and the final volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault increasingly turned critique toward techniques of the self, or what he called “care of self;” but the political implications gradually became less evident. Foucault reinterpreted the *First Alcibiades* as a dialogue less focused on knowledge of the self and more on care of the self. From there, he pivoted our attention to the permanent practices of the self in the Stoics and Epicureans. And from then on, his analysis was trained on dimensions of subjectivity that enriched, but at the same time concealed his earlier analyses of power. Foucault’s ambition was to augment his theory of knowledge-power through an exploration of the subjective dimension of self-formation, or what he called “the history of desiring man.” His goal was to “investigate how individuals were led to practice, on themselves and on others, a hermeneutics of desire.”²⁸ His aim was, ultimately, to produce a critical philosophy along three axes: knowledge, power, and subjectivity. And it is indeed possible that the integrative work would come next, but it was cut short by his untimely death in 1984. As a result, Foucault’s later work on subjectivity, although focused on practices of the self, stands for many readers at somewhat of a distance from their political engagements.²⁹



The historical setbacks effectively pushed critical philosophy down an epistemological path. With Antonio Gramsci’s idea of cultural hegemony, the

Frankfurt School's critique of ideology, Louis Althusser's notes on ideological state apparatuses, Foucault's theories of knowledge-power and, later, regimes of truth, and Derrida's deconstructive practices, critical philosophy took a sharply epistemological turn.

Here too, the long-term ambition may have been to transform human existence, not merely to interpret it; but critical philosophers needed first to understand—to contemplate—how human beings come to believe what they believe, how their desires are shaped, how their subjectivity is formed.³⁰ The agents of revolution may be in the best position to feel their exploitation, given their placement in the hierarchy of modern capitalist society; but that does not ensure that they can properly understand it. “Even the situation of the proletariat is, in this society, no guarantee of correct knowledge,” Horkheimer proclaimed. “Even to the proletariat the world superficially seems quite different than it *really* is.”³¹

So it fell to the critical philosophers to clear the epistemological ground, to unveil the ideological interferences, and to let others see properly. This would give birth to decades of philosophical discourse on ideology critique, *epistemes*, knowledge-power, and *différance*—all of which put primacy back on *theoria* rather than praxis, and on the contemplative intellectual rather than the critical practitioner.³²

The epistemological work was certainly productive. New ways of thinking about truth and ideology emerged, liberated from the deceptive charms of analytic philosophy. In the ensuing epistemological investigations, relations of power took on an increasingly important role, especially as the triad that Foucault elaborated in his quest to analyze truth—knowledge/power/subjectivity—took hold of the critical imagination. The problems of false consciousness and genuine interests generated productive challenges to liberal theory. The concept of epistemes and the paradigm of an archaeology of knowledge opened new vistas, as did the genealogical method. The turn to subjectivity and the history of desire proved fertile ground to denaturalize phenomena ranging from sexuality to political assembly.

But the epistemological questions took precedence over praxis, and critical theory descended into petty internecine epistemological battles and struggles of influence over the correct epistemological sensibility to guide critique—with Marxian and Althusserian conceptions of science and history opposing postcolonial, subaltern, critical race, feminist, or queer theories on the constructed nature of society, all of which contested Deleuzian, Lacanian, Foucaultian, or Derridean approaches to social reality. Cliquish epistemological politics replaced healthy debate over praxis, as the main question no longer was “What is to be done?” but rather how to interpret the social landscape in light of the deep conflict between the various approaches of ideology critique, epistemes, deconstruction,

postcolonialism, and other critical theories. The criticality of critical philosophy itself—focused on the unintended consequences of well-intentioned programs—also made many critical philosophers hesitate to engage praxis, especially as egalitarian experiments continued to miscarry around the globe, from Mao's Cultural Revolution to the Cambodian killing fields. These historical catastrophes chastened critical philosophers even more, pushing them further away from praxis and into the safer terrain of epistemology.

Instead of debating praxis, the more pressing—and anodyne—question became how people came to believe what they believe and desire what they desire, including fascism or totalitarianism, whether Nazi- or Soviet-style. Critical philosophers sought refuge in epistemology, almost as if to protect themselves and keep their hands clean. And part of the resistance to praxis was surely a necessary corrective to the know-it-all intellectual telling everyone what they should do. The figure of the universal intellectual, implicating himself in every controversy, bullhorn at his mouth blaring Marxist or Maoist dogma, was broadly and rightly attacked. The apparent asymmetries of clairvoyance between the public intellectual and the masses became somewhat problematic, resulting in introspective critiques of critical theory by thinkers such as Jacques Rancière, Luc Boltanski, Sharon Marcus, Bruno Latour, and others.³³

These critiques of critical theory could have generated productive debate over praxis, as they had done earlier. But instead, they led to a further withdrawal of critical philosophy into the academy and a form of entrenchment. As Didier Fassin shows, critical theory withdrew to a handful of academic departments in higher education.³⁴ The space of critique, previously more public, narrowed to the critical professoriate at effete universities and colleges, and even there to the margins of power in rhetoric and English departments, or at the fringes of professional schools.

The epistemological battles subtly diverted critical philosophy from its true ambition—to change the world. The task, once again, was to know it. To analyze it on proper epistemological foundations. To offer new understandings of how desire or power shapes knowledge and makes people want things that hurt them. To make sense of how the new spirit of capitalism might coopt cultural and artistic revolutionary impulses. To identify, analyze, and diagnose our contemporary crises. This was so much the case, in fact, that the words *crisis* and *critique*—*Krise und Kritik*—became homologues. From Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht's proposal for a new journal titled *Krise und Kritik* in 1930, to Reinhart Koselleck's 1959 book *Kritik und Krise*, to the current redeployment of those conjoined terms, the analysis of crises soon became the primary focus of critical philosophy.³⁵ Critical philosophy folded back into epistemology and crisis identification. Critical contemplation *alone* became praxis.

Many critical philosophers today—even some of the leading critical theorists of our time—now openly resist the call to praxis. Axel Honneth’s book *The Idea of Socialism*, published in 2017, is a good illustration. An intervention seeking to rehabilitate the idea of socialism and to breathe new life back into the concept, *The Idea of Socialism* is a deeply committed engagement and presents itself as a veritable *crie de cœur*. Yet right up front, on the fifth page, Honneth warns:

I make no attempt to draw connections to current political constellations and possibilities for action. I will not be dealing with the strategic question of how socialism could influence current political events, but solely how the original intention of socialism could be reformulated so as to make it once again a source of political-ethical orientations.³⁶

“No attempt” to discuss “possibilities for action”: the question of praxis has fallen by the wayside. Changing the world is no longer the task of the critical philosopher—now it falls to the political actor and strategist. The critical theorist proposes ideas and diagnoses crises, but others may have to find some use for all this. The task of critical philosophy has come full circle once more: not to change the world, but to critically understand it.

Today, for the most part, praxis has taken a back seat to theory. Practice, practical knowledge, and clinical activity have become the handmaids of theoretical knowledge—not only in the traditional disciplines and sciences, like law, engineering, or physics, but now, paradoxically, in the one domain that sought to overturn the relationship: critical philosophy. This is so much the case that, today, in the one realm that was designed to transform the world, we laud critical theories but are incapable of properly identifying critical praxis.



The collapse of critical philosophy and of its ambition to change the world, not just interpret it, could not have come at a worse time. It coincides with the most pressing crises that humans have ever faced: the looming cataclysm of global climate change, the hegemonic rise of neoliberalism and growing inequalities within nations, the surge of a fascist New Right at the international dimension, the emerging threat of pandemics, nuclear proliferation and conflict between rogue nations. We are living through one of the most critical periods, if not *the* most critical, in human history—with critical taken in its most formative etymological sense. Our politics, our world, our very Earth are in critical condition and are situated at turning points from which we may never recover.

After more than four decades of global neoliberal governance and a

generalized grab for the commons—including Earth and her resources—we face perils unparalleled in time and along multiple dimensions. Growing domestic inequality has fueled extreme-right populist movements around the globe, as exemplified by the growing popularity of right-wing populist leaders in the United States, Brazil, Turkey, India, and across Europe. Xenophobic sentiment is mounting in quarters around the world, and strongmen political leaders are gaining power on the back of a global “war on terror.” Meanwhile, global climate change threatens the planet, and world leaders such as U.S. president Donald Trump deny the science. It is fair to say, with Bruno Latour, that “it is as though a significant segment of the ruling classes (known today rather too loosely as ‘the elites’) had concluded that the earth no longer had room enough for them and for everyone else.”³⁷ As I write, the fragile democratic process and inclusive politics of the United States—as faulty as they are—teeter on the verge of collapse, and it is no longer unimaginable that the country may be headed toward authoritarianism.

The global crises could not be greater, and yet critical theory is missing in action. Having disdained the question “What is to be done?” critical theory has little to offer by way of critical praxis. Critique is failing at the time it is needed most—producing a real crisis in critical theory itself. This has given rise to an unexpected quiescence, even a low-grade paralysis, among critical thinkers, at least in contrast to the more vocal resistance of liberal critics and organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Human Rights Watch, or the Center for Constitutional Rights in the United States. The critical response, by contrast, sounds muffled. The critical Left, as opposed to the liberal Left, appears disarmed.

When it has mobilized, the critical Left has tended to use predominantly liberal measures and has folded back on liberal institutions. In the United States at least, the principal forms of critical resistance to the Trump administration involved, first, civil rights litigation in federal courts aimed at blocking executive orders on everything from immigration to sexual orientation in the military, to the citizenship question on the census; second, protest marches, from the Women’s March held the very day after Trump’s inauguration to even a March for Science; and third, online petitions, letters, editorials, and statements of protest by individuals and their institutions. The principal resistance to Donald Trump reposed in a special counsel investigation by Robert Mueller, a former director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and House impeachment proceedings. Paradoxically, the FBI, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), career diplomats, and other intelligence agencies became the critical Left’s strongest allies.

For the most part, critical resistance took the path of liberal democratic forms of resistance, even among the most critically oriented. The resistance to the administration’s immigration ban—a Muslim ban despite the administration’s reluctance to call it that—followed precisely a liberal civil and political rights model:

civil rights lawyers, and even state attorneys general, went to court and sued President Trump, while critical theorists volunteered their expertise as area experts or translators for asylum hearings and public challenges. The same is true for the critical fight on global climate change. In effect, critical resistance predominantly used the courts and liberal institutions as an attempted bulwark against these unprecedented assaults.

I am not pointing fingers. I say this fully conscious that my own critical praxis in these times of crisis has deployed predominantly liberal-legal weapons—litigation, protest marches, petitions, editorials, and electoral politics. Days after he signed the Muslim ban, Tom Durkin and I sued Trump on behalf of a young Syrian doctor denied entry into the country, challenging his executive order on the grounds of the establishment of religion. A few months later, I took the case of a dual national, a Libyan-British young man, whose visa was being denied, and pursued administrative appeals and applied political pressure. I marched down New York's streets in the Women's March and other protests. I rallied law professors to oppose the confirmation of an unfit Supreme Court nomination. I doubled down representing inmates who were on death row or condemned to life imprisonment without parole in Alabama. Noah Smith-Drelich and I sued North Dakota law enforcement for their unconstitutional repression of protest and assembly at the Standing Rock reservation. I advised a Democratic presidential candidate as well as I could. I employed every weapon at my disposal to resist the tide of xenophobia and neo-fascism, and many of these indeed were liberal-legal methods.

And to be sure, the liberal toolkit has had positive effects in critical times like these. It is surely more desirable than raw authoritarianism and serves as a necessary corrective in these times of crisis. It has even had some success—for instance, blocking or stalling some of the worst executive orders and regressive political actions. But it is not necessarily critical praxis and does not necessarily offer a critical solution. In all likelihood, it merely postpones reckoning with the crises, especially if the right-wing populist wave eventually engulfs Congress and packs the judiciary as well.

These liberal remedies are not bulwarks against encroaching right-wing populism. They are temporary measures and are easily appropriated by the New Right. They are no more than stopgap measures in an ongoing political struggle. They stand on fragile footing. They rest, for the most part, on illusions that may well have contributed to the crises in which we find ourselves today. The rule of law, for instance, is far more malleable than its proponents imagine and can easily be distorted in the hands of autocratic leaders, as happened under the Third Reich or in post-9/11 America. (Recall the infamous torture memos produced by the Justice Department during the George W. Bush administration that immunized

unconscionable practices like waterboarding, stress positions, and inhumane deprivations.) Facts—particularly social facts—also are far more malleable than we would like to admit. Many legal facts, for instance, depend on contested notions of materiality, proximity, or intent that are more influenced by relations of power than by objective measurement. Truth, it turns out, is not immune to politics; there is no wall, but instead a tight relationship between truth, knowledge, and power—hopefully, the epistemic detour has taught us that much.



We face unprecedented critical times at a very moment of critical failure. Now, it is time to return to the task of critical philosophy: not to merely interpret the world, but to change it—to develop critical praxis appropriate to these critical times.

Critical theory is up to the task. In fact, it is precisely in crisis moments that critical theory grew the most and has been the most productive. During the 1920s and 1930s, the United States, France, and Germany especially, confronted economic turmoil amid the rise of fascism. The Cold War, colonialism, and the nuclear arms race rippled across the continents in the 1960s, causing wars, civil conflicts, and student and worker revolutions in May 1968 and thereafter. In both of these periods, the critical times renewed critical theory and gave birth to new forms of critical praxis. The 1920s, especially during the fall of the Weimar Republic, gave rise to the Frankfurt School and a whole generation of innovative critical theorists—many of whom would emigrate in exile around the world and spawn a critical diaspora.³⁸ The 1960s, with its global student uprisings and government repression, stimulated another wave of critical theory and praxis, giving way to a formidable decade of critical thought. The 1970s was particularly fertile for critical theory and praxis, with critics such as Althusser, Arendt, Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Cornelius Castoriadis, Foucault, and others upending formerly established ways of thinking. The critical debates over praxis in the 1970s were truly remarkable—stimulated by a series of global political upheavals.

It is now time to steer critical philosophy back on track so that we can attend to the most pressing matter: to change this world in these times of utter crisis. These times could not be more pressing. They demand a renewed critical philosophy—one that draws on the epistemological detour to reconstruct itself into a critical praxis. It is time to chart new directions for critical praxis.

In times past, critical theory would have had a ready-made answer. For much of its history, Marxist thinkers dominated the critical Left. Critical theory was tethered to class struggle and historical materialism. Critical practice—what became known as *praxis*, in fact—was oriented toward proletarian revolution. There were, of course, heated debates over tactics. There were severe

disagreements over revolution versus parliamentary reform, famously between Rosa Luxemburg and Eduard Bernstein, or over vanguardism versus democratic forms, famously between Lenin and Luxemburg.³⁹ Yet the broad outline of the path forward was well defined: class struggle, international solidarity, and radical social transformation.

This vision of praxis shaped the first generation of the Frankfurt School and represented a common horizon for the critical Left in the early to mid-twentieth century. But with peasant and anticolonial insurrections in the East and Global South at midcentury, and in the wake of the repression following May 1968, many critical voices began to fracture any such consensus. The decline of syndicalism and of more radical factions of the international labor movement gradually transformed and pacified labor movements during the second half of the twentieth century. The events in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in Hungary and the Eastern bloc, unveiled some of the illusions of critical theory itself, as did the experience of May 1968, where the vitality of the student and worker movements slammed against the rigidity of Leftist parties, especially the Western communist parties still beholden to the Soviet Union. At that point, the grip of Marx's philosophy of history began to loosen. And once that hold dissolved, the critical prescriptions got muddied. Since that time, critical praxis has lacked its earlier coherence—leaving many critical thinkers today somewhat disarmed in the face of renewed right-wing populism.

There is today no longer an intelligible or coherent critical response to the question “What is to be done?” In fact, the question itself has become repugnant to many critical theorists. Apart from a dwindling core, few critical theorists pose the question this way, and even fewer would explicitly advocate the answers that most on the critical Left would have imagined in the early or mid-twentieth century. Today, right-wing populist movements have cannibalized segments of the proletarian base of the former Left, turning old-style class warfare into anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and ethnoracist conflict. The cleavage is no longer between the workers and the bourgeoisie, but rather between a populist white class and minorities and immigrants (or children of immigrants), predominantly persons of color. In the United States, it is between impoverished whites and destitute blacks and Latinos. The problems that this raises today are acute.



This book offers a way forward. It is time—I argue, past time—to imagine a new critical praxis theory for the twenty-first century. There is today an urgent need to rethink critical praxis and reframe the very questions that it poses. This is the task that I have set for myself in these pages: to counter decades of contemplative

complacency and to return critical praxis to its central place in critical philosophy. In doing so, this project will strive to reformulate, for a more self-reflective critical age, the action imperative “What is to be done?”

In approaching the praxis imperative in this way, I do not intend by any means to return to Lenin, nor to side with Lenin in his debate with Luxemburg. My intention, on the contrary, is to displace the question; however, in originally approaching the praxis question from this tradition, I mean to resist as strongly as possible the seduction and temptation of contemplation in critical theory. To resist as much as possible the safety of retreating to questions of knowledge and epistemology, or crises diagnoses, rather than confronting as directly as possible the action imperative—with all its difficulties. I intend to resist the move that allows critical philosophy to consider itself simply a form of praxis. To resist the temptation to gradually return the discussion to epistemology or contemplative philosophy, rather than critical praxis. To resist the gradation that ultimately disparages and disdains the practical dimensions, the programs of action, the possibilities for action. Far too many critical thinkers today protect themselves, refuse to take the risk of praxis, and fail to put their ideas (and reputations) honestly at stake. Far too often, we do so by resisting the praxis question. We propose instead to identify the crisis and offer sophisticated critical analysis, but refuse to go any further and engage the question of critical praxis. We claim to be engaged in praxis but refuse to articulate a practice or program. And inevitably, contemplation takes the place of critical theory and praxis.

No more. The problem needs to be addressed at its heart. Today, the praxis imperative must be reformulated. The question “What is to be done?” cannot be asked as a way to check anyone’s identification papers. Neither is it a way to distribute reward or locate blame, nor as a way to silence others or crowd anyone out. The question must be rethought and reformulated and nevertheless pursued because, in the end, the aim of critical philosophy is to change the world—not just to change ourselves, although that may be a prerequisite, but to remake our society along lines of compassion, equality, solidarity, and social justice.

Twentieth-century critical theory, especially discourse analysis, demonstrated that even within our own intellectual communities, certain people are heard and others not. It revealed that our own critical practices often serve to reinforce invidious social order and hierarchies. It is precisely for this reason that Foucault’s early praxis attempted to resist these tendencies and make space for marginalized voices to be heard. The idea was to enable silenced discourse to become audible. Especially with Foucault’s prison abolition efforts with the GIP in the early 1970s, the strategy revolved around creating a space for others to be heard—the prisoners themselves—rather than telling them what to do or what to believe. One can hear this throughout the tracts of the GIP, like this one, from March 15, 1971:

It is about letting speak those who have an experience of prison. It is not that they need help in “becoming conscious”: the consciousness of the oppression is absolutely clear, and they are well aware of who the enemy is. But the current system denies them the means of formulating things, of organizing themselves.⁴⁰

Discourse analysis made us acutely aware of the privilege of certain speakers. The postcolonial critique alerted us to the privilege even of radical critical theorists; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s further critique in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” challenged even the ability of subaltern scholars to hear the voice of the subaltern, underscoring the need for even more vigilance and attention.⁴¹ These are necessary correctives. As we learned, as Foucault did not tire of reminding us, and as Spivak highlights in her own critique of Foucault, the most affected among us do not need a public intellectual to tell them what they want: “the masses no longer need him to gain knowledge: they *know* perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves.”⁴² Spivak may well be right in her searing critique of this sentence: “The ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual’s stock-in-trade.”⁴³ But even if so, that does not diminish the concern that we, critical theorists, should no longer be speaking for others.

In this sense, the question “What is to be done?” must be reformulated today. Critical theory cannot speak for others. It must instead foster a space for everyone who shares the critical ambition to speak and be heard. The solution to the problem of speaking for others is not to silence anyone, but the opposite: to collaborate and cultivate spaces where all can be heard, especially those who are most affected by our crises today. This reflects as well a new writing style and grammar today. We no longer write in the third person, as Horkheimer did at midcentury. We do not write in universal form either, as Marx or Hegel did before that. Neither do we hide behind the passive tense. No, today, each and every one of us must write in the first person. And that means that we can no longer ask, passively, “What is to be done?” but must actively reformulate the very question of critical praxis for ourselves. For me, it becomes: “What more shall I do, and what work is my praxis doing?”



To change the world through critical praxis: this book calls for a profusion of critical debate over our own critical practices. In the process, it seeks to valorize the work of those critical voices who have stayed true to the ambition of critical praxis. This includes critical philosophers like Angela Davis, who engages in critical praxis

through organizations like Critical Resistance and her writings *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who tell us how to organize, how to assemble, how to revolt, how to seize power, and how to transform society in their book *Assembly*. “Smash the state,” they write. “Blow the dam!” “Take power.”⁴⁴ It includes Chantal Mouffe, who advocates for left populism. “To stop the rise of right-wing populist parties,” she proclaims in *For a Left Populism*, “it is necessary to design a properly political answer through a left populist movement that will federate all the democratic struggles against postdemocracy.”⁴⁵ It includes Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, who tell us, in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, to burn it all down and start over; and Jack Halberstam, who exclaims: “We refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls. We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming.”⁴⁶ And Sara Ahmed, who offers a militant, engaged, constant, and unbending vision to create a new world for women and persons of color to inhabit, to live, to find themselves.⁴⁷ And Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who not only brilliantly diagnoses the crisis of racialized mass incarceration but weds that diagnosis to her militancy for abolition and racial justice.⁴⁸

These are the critical works that this project seeks to valorize—not to agree with in every respect, but to highlight and engage. They are, however, outliers in critical theory—and most often, they are excoriated for being too praxis oriented, for risking to change the world, for putting themselves out there and addressing praxis head on. By contrast, for the most part, critical philosophers influenced today by the leading strands of critical thought shy away from praxis. They seek shelter in *theoria*. But that is no longer tenable. And so, it is to these others—these courageous others—that we must turn. The ambition of this book is to help create a space where every critical thinker can propose how to rethink critical theory and share how they are doing critical praxis, with the ultimate aim of changing the world.



I will not stop there, though. I will not simply call for a new critical praxis without placing myself at risk. In what follows—and first in summary fashion in the following chapter—I will set forth my own position for a renewed critical praxis theory, in order to fulfill my own challenge and put myself on the line. I do not intend to abuse the author’s prerogative, but I will not shirk my responsibility either.

I will set out my views as schematically as possible in the next chapter, in order to respond honestly to my own call, before articulating a thorough reconstruction of critical theory and praxis in three parts, which will elaborate a reconstructed critical theory ([part I](#)), a reimagined emancipatory horizon ([part II](#)), and a renewed critical praxis ([part III](#)).⁴⁹ I will then return to my own critique and praxis in [chapter 18](#) and elaborate them throughout [part IV](#). And I hope and pray, in an agnostic way, that you will join and lead in cutting a new path for critical theory and praxis in the twenty-first century.

Toward a Critical Praxis Theory

This work, *Critique & Praxis*, is not named after Marx, or for Marx—although both terms, and especially *praxis*, are so closely associated with him. With Marx, that is, and with other critical thinkers who used Marx, such as the early Frankfurt School, Jean-Paul Sartre, the members of the Praxis School, or the contributors to the *Praxis* journal and, later, *Praxis International*. No, this is not a Marxist project, nor a project about Marxism. Marx's philosophy of history no longer holds today, and his analysis of political economy is dated. In many ways, the reconstructed critical praxis theory proposed here, with its emphasis on illusions and values, may be closer to Nietzsche than to Marx, even though just as much of Nietzsche's philosophy also must be set aside, ruthlessly—especially its misogyny and aristocracy. In any event, this is by no means a Marxist manifesto.

But Sartre, Marx, and those other praxis thinkers—whatever their faults—manifested in their intellectual engagements, in their lives, in their very being, a distinct attitude or way of doing critical philosophy that I aspire to. A way of doing critique oriented toward both intellectual emancipation *and* social change. It is *that* way of thinking, of being, of living, of doing that I would like to recover. It is a way of being that draws on other valuable modes of engaging the world—the more contemplative mode of philosophy, the creative mode of *poiesis*—but that revolves more centrally around political activity, in essence, around political doing. As both Nicholas Lobkowitz and Richard Bernstein underscore, this political way of life, as far back as Aristotle, captured the performative dimension of action in the political sphere—performative in the sense that *poiesis* involved making something, whereas *praxis* entailed doing something.¹ It involved a political and ethical form of being.

All three ways of being were intended to be active forms of living, as Lobkowitz and Bernstein emphasize. In other words, the contrast was not intended to be between active and inactive ways of living, but between different active ways of living. *Theoria* was not intended to be merely passive reflection, as opposed to the active doing of praxis. For the ancients, they were instead, as Bernstein suggests, “two dimensions of the truly human and free life.”² In fact, on Bernstein's reading of the ancients, especially Aristotle, the two ways of living were intended to be joined.³ The good life was one where there is a harmony. That is quite an ideal—

and perhaps I share it. But even a harmony requires rebalancing at times. The ambition of critical philosophy, at least since the nineteenth century, has been to rebalance that harmony and invigorate the praxis imperative. Critical philosophy was born of a desire to push theoretical inquiry in the direction of practice as a more robust mode of being.

You will recall that Foucault, reading Kant's essay "An Answer to the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?'" identified what he called an "attitude of modernity." Foucault identified in Kant the beginning of a new way to think critically in relation to the present.⁴ It consisted of a new philosophical attitude that is oriented, genuinely, to the contemporary moment. "By 'attitude,'" Foucault explained, "I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task."⁵ According to Foucault, this attitude of modernity would bring together philosophical inquiry and critical thought focused on contemporary historical actuality. The contemporary moment—most notably, the French Revolution, for Kant—became the object of critical thought. Foucault placed Marx in the wake of this new attitude of modernity.

In a similar way, I suggest, Marx inaugurated a "*practical* attitude of modernity," pivoting the attitude of modernity not just onto the contemporary moment, but from theoretical to practical engagements—from *theoria* to *praxis*. Richard Bernstein traces this to the writings of the young Marx, where he documents three stages of the turn to *praxis*. The first, Marx's early call in 1843 for a new attitude and role for the intellectual to awaken self-consciousness about the need for revolutionary change through the "*relentless criticism of all existing conditions*, relentless in the sense that the criticism is not afraid of its findings and just as little afraid of the conflict with the powers that be." The idea was that critique must serve as the way to awaken a new sense of human dignity and bring about social change. The second, when Marx materializes this relentless criticism and actualizes it by tapping into our deepest passions—when he explicitly argues, "Material force must be overthrown by material force. But theory also becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses"; or, more directly, when he writes: "Theory is actualized in a people only insofar as it actualizes their needs." The final, third moment, when Marx pens the eleventh thesis. As Bernstein writes, "The critique of philosophy had dialectically led Marx to the conclusion that only a correct, detailed understanding of existing social reality could effect such a revolution." At that point, Marx goes beyond philosophy to the critique of political economy, and—no mere coincidence—the term *praxis* almost disappears from Marx's vocabulary.⁶

My fear is that today, that practical attitude of modernity, inflected in *praxis* as a mode of being, has dissipated such that critical philosophy now has become too

contemplative. One might think of the history of critical philosophy as being punctuated by praxis moments—first by the Left Hegelians’s call for philosophy to become a practical activity that would directly influence social life; then by Rosa Luxemburg; later by Frantz Fanon and Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*; later by Foucault and the young maoists.⁷ Faced with these critical times today, I would argue, we desperately need a renewed praxis moment—a corrective. That is the ambition of this intervention. But it entails rethinking critical theory, its horizon, and its relation to praxis.

My ambition here is not to inspire critical theorists to become activists. It is not to make theorists drop their pens and turn to direct action. I am fond of Daniel Defert’s story of how, during May 1968, he threw his doctoral thesis to the pavement—“*jeté aux pavés*,” as he said—and turned to Maoism. But that is certainly not my intention here, particularly because, in the end, I do not believe in influencing others. I do not even believe in the idea of “influence.” Critical thinkers, as I will show, are not “influenced” by others. They use and deploy their own interpretations of others’ writings and practices to pursue their own political interventions. But also, and more important, because critical philosophy is not about telling others what to do, or even trying to signal that or subliminally hint at that. Critical philosophy, in the end, is a personal praxis. My ambition, then, is to instantiate a personal corrective moment—to push myself back toward praxis and to confront my praxis with critical theory.

In the same way in which Marx’s encounter with Hegel’s philosophy, when he was a young student at the University of Berlin, was a traumatic experience that produced a type of conversion or life change to praxis,⁸ I would like the current moment of political crisis to serve as an alarm bell. We face today an unprecedented set of crises: the global climate crisis, the rise of extreme-right populist movements, the international impact of neoliberal policies, the threat of pandemics, increased xenophobic expressions and attacks on minorities, and the fallout of a global war on terror. We are in the midst of a rare historical epoch of worldwide political turbulence. In these times, now more than ever, I feel compelled not only to diagnose these crises, but to answer the most pressing question: What am I to do, what more shall I do, and how will it work?

I fear that even my own diagnosis of crises is no longer sufficient. I must supplement it with a more engaged confrontation of my own critical practices. Even if, as Aristotle believed and Bernstein underscores, *theoria* is active, it alone is not active *enough* for me. I need to engage in *critique and praxis*—not just to answer the question “What should be done?” but to confront my ongoing practice with theory and vice versa, and in the process to enrich both my praxis and my critical theory.

The fact is, the concept of praxis in Marx’s early thought had a much thicker

and richer nature than just theorizing the question “What is to be done?” in the face of our diagnosed crises today. Human practice and real existence, for Marx, were sources of knowledge. Through human interactions—the same set of human clashes and struggles that Hegel anthropomorphized as spirit (*Geist*)—we can learn things about our present. For the young Marx, practice taught him about the feelings of alienation from being separated from the product of one’s labor, about feelings of recognition, and so on. As Bernstein demonstrates in his chapter on Marx in *Praxis and Action*, Marx operated a transformation of Hegelian thought that inverted the relationship between the consciousness of a world spirit or rationality and the actions of human beings. Rather than spirit and its peripeteia being the motor of history and human progress, it is human action and interaction, as praxis, that constitute our political condition and our history.⁹

What this suggests is that the relationship between theory and practice cannot just be the thin *application* of critical theory to actual circumstances—thin in the way in which we tend to say that our political actions have to be “guided” by political principles or theories or reason, or that we “apply” theory to practice. The simple direction of movement from one pole of the spectrum to the other—from theory or from practice—has a significant effect on where we end up: if we start from contemplation, it becomes too easy to propose that we merely apply our theories, or simply theorize what is to be done. If we start from the other direction, from praxis, it becomes too easy to suggest that our political practices could enlighten the crises that surround us.

This entails the need to develop a space of critical theory that does not merely theorize practice, nor that simply starts from praxis, but that is genuinely and simultaneously a space of *critique and praxis*: genuinely a space where practice and critical thought confront each other constantly, so that we do away with notions like applying theory, or drawing implications, or theorizing practice. In fact, the notions of a separation or of a dichotomy of theory and practice are not productive ways to proceed. Instead, it must be a constant confrontation that ends up creating, in effect, a unified space. It is the unity in constant confrontation that pushes both our critical practices and our critical theory. It is this space that I call *critique and praxis*.

In this book, I chart a path forward to the space of critique and praxis. It requires, I argue, a reconstruction of critical theory, as well as a reimagining of the critical horizon and a reconceptualization of critical praxis. I offer those in parts I, II, and III. But I refuse to shirk my own call to praxis. I refuse to refrain from putting myself at risk. So, in effect, I will start at the end, as promised. I will start by revealing my hand. In this chapter, I will set out, first, my position on critical praxis; second, my view of the proper relationship between theory and praxis; and third, my outline for a reconstructed critical philosophy for the twenty-first century—what

I call a *critical praxis theory*.

Reformulating the Praxis Imperative

It feels odd starting at the end, but to do otherwise would undermine the ultimate point—namely, first, that the question “What is to be done?” may well capture the action imperative at the heart of critical philosophy, but in these times of heightened reflexivity, it needs to be updated and reformulated. Second, that the reconstruction of critical philosophy cannot serve as a universal or as a model for others, but only as a subjective enterprise and intervention. The work of reconstruction has to be done by each critical thinker for herself or himself. The value of reconstruction is in the work of reconstruction itself. In other political traditions, political movements can and often do thrive on leadership, emulation, and influence. Some political traditions in fact depend on charismatic leadership and authority. But the critical approach typically does not, and a critical political movement typically cannot. It has, at its root, an inextricable element of reflexivity that does not make “following” easy. There are, naturally, exceptions, such as recent calls for a left populism that are not allergic to charismatic leadership.¹⁰ But this is precisely what riles so many critical theorists. It is, at least, what I object to.

So the question, for me, cannot be “What is to be done?” in the sense of telling others what to do, how to organize, whom to follow, when to submit, or how to revolt. It always has to be a question that one poses to *oneself*—or rather, that I pose to *myself*. This is, I would argue, both a liability and the strength of critical philosophy. Because of its reflexivity, critical theory does not lend itself well to organization or militarization. When there is unity, it is fractious. It is contested. It is constantly challenged by another layer of critical thought. In my view, however, critical philosophy has no choice but to make a virtue out of this necessity—and to turn the question onto oneself.

I would reformulate the question “What is to be done?”, a question usually addressed to others, as a question addressed only to myself: “What more am I to do, and how does what I am doing work?” That is the reflexive question and posture that I will take. What is *my* critical praxis, and what work is it doing? Does it work, and if so, how? How does it pursue the critical ambition to change the world? How does it survive and confront critique? How does it affect the world? The question “What more am I to do?” places the emphasis and the onus on my own praxis. It places the focus on *my* actions. And it carries a number of connotations. By asking myself how my *own* praxis works, or what work my praxis is doing, I want to challenge myself to critically understand what in fact I am trying

to accomplish with my actions. I also want to focus, equally, on the *what* in the question: to focus on the object that is, precisely, *what* I am doing and *how* it works.

In the end, the unity of theory and praxis does not mean that theory can dictate praxis, as if it were simply applied thought. Neither does it imply that I abandon theory and just start from praxis. It means that I must constantly confront the two and leave neither unscathed, for I cannot theorize when I am not engaged, and I cannot act without critical reflection. I must constantly engage and reengage in praxis *and* critical theory, and *confront the two*. If I, as a critical thinker, am not actively engaged in political contestation, I am not being honest either to myself or to critical philosophy. Critical theorizing alone, for me, is not a praxis. Writing critical theory, even writing critical interventions and teaching critical theory alone, for me, are not praxis. My critical theory has to confront, nourish, and be challenged by my own critical praxis. I need to be struggling, writing, litigating, marching, organizing, fighting—and if I am not doing that, I am no longer, in my eyes, a critical theorist. I've become a contemplative philosopher. I surely cannot tell anyone else how to act, nor do I espouse action for action's sake. I am simply saying that I have to engage in praxis and confront theory and praxis. Critical theory is not just about diagnosing crises. It is not just about *Krise und Kritik*. It is about *critique and praxis*. Especially in these times of acute crises, I must engage in critical praxis and confront my praxis with critical theory.

My answer, then, to the question “What more am I to do?” is this: I litigate, I militate, I organize, I write, I advocate, I organize, I teach, I convene—and throughout, at all times, I brutally confront my own praxis with critical theory, and vice versa. As I discuss in [chapter 18](#)—a more personal account of my struggles since, there, I will directly respond to my own reformulation of the action imperative—my critical praxis has evolved in confrontation with critical theory to the point where, today, it embraces an abolitionist ambition aimed not only at ending the death penalty in the United States, where I started my litigation praxis, but at the broader goal of abolishing our punitive paradigm of governing in this country—of abolishing our punitive society.

Through conflict and friction, and the constant back-and-forth between praxis and theory, I have gradually enlarged my field of action to address evolving and growing crises, and now constantly challenge my own engagements—whether they are litigating on behalf of the condemned, suing President Donald Trump to enjoin the Muslim ban, organizing opposition to a judicial nomination, challenging repressive police practices, or advocating against racial profiling and biased algorithms. Having spent more than three decades as a public-interest litigator and organizer, and as a critical theorist and writer, having dedicated years to building critical conversations and collectives, I have learned to confront my praxis with

theory and my theory with praxis, and to push both to their maximum. I deploy that conflict toward social justice and the emancipatory ideals at the heart of critical philosophy—not always with success, but always with passion. In all this, I aspire to create a space to live the way of the critical theoretic practitioner and critical praxis theorist.

As such, I aspire to an ideal that differs from the model of the universal, specific, or even singular intellectual. I aspire to a way of being, as a critical praxis theorist, that has not yet been entirely conceived—at least not with the exact same sensibility that I envisage. It differs from the other models that have been articulated, especially in relation to Foucault.

In an essay on forms of truth-telling titled “*Dire, contredire*” (Speak, contradict), Étienne Balibar explores the relationship, in Foucault’s late lectures, between Foucault’s study of forms of truth-telling (or what Foucault referred to, using the ancient Greek term, as *parrhesia*), the evolution in Foucault’s understanding of critique, and Foucault’s unique position or self-understanding as an intellectual.¹¹ By connecting these three dimensions, Balibar proposes that the practice of speaking truth—especially the formula of speaking truth to power, of frank speech, or even of fearless speech, and of the courage of truth, to which Foucault often returned—was central to his distinctive way of defining critique as the act of resistance to being governed in a particular way. Speaking out, breaking silence, and frank speech become, in Foucault’s late lectures, forms of praxis or ways of being that appear valuable to political existence.

Balibar locates in this way of being a distinct and peculiar element: a form of resistance or contrarianism associated with the notion of contradiction, of counterconduct, of opposition to ordinary discursive practices. It is an agonistic form of truth-telling—a contrarian one. Balibar emphasizes the element of counterspeech, underlining the hidden syntax of contradiction as “*contra-diction*,” with diction, naturally, indexing speech.¹² Balibar marshals the multiple expressions, throughout Foucault’s writings, of this counterconduct in speech and of the use of the term *counter*. Balibar associates this counterpositionality with a certain agonistic relationship or resistance to ordinary democratic processes. He associates it with the figure of Diogenes, the cynic, one of the truth-tellers whom Foucault studied (with some admiration).

Balibar suggests, between the lines, that this form of *contra-diction* may be essential to democracy as a vital counterweight—and that Foucault valued it as a form of counterconduct. Balibar refers to the “necessity of a disruptive intervention to restore democracy.”¹³ He imagines it as a ballast to Habermasian discourse ethics. Along these lines, Balibar proposes that Foucault may have understood these forms of counterspeech and contradiction as a method of critique and, even more, that Foucault understood himself, as an intellectual, in this

counterpositionality. (This notion of “counter,” which recurs throughout Balibar’s essay and writings, as well as those of Foucault, is extremely productive, and I will come back to it in [chapter 6](#) of [part I](#).)

In discussing “*contra-diction*” as a form of praxis and critique, Balibar offers an alternative way to conceive of Foucault’s role as intellectual—an alternative, that is, to the usual distinction between what is called the “universal” and the “specific” intellectual. Regarding the latter, Foucault himself had outlined the model of the specific intellectual, as opposed to the universal intellectual—a somewhat derogatory term, aimed mostly at Sartre and intended to capture the intellectual actor who always has a position (and typically the same position) on all political issues. The specific intellectual, by contrast, weighs in more selectively and develops unique positions deeply immersed in the specific context of any particular political conflict. Foucault at times identified as a specific intellectual.

In light of the idea of “*contra-diction*” as critique, Balibar proposes a third model of the intellectual, an alternative model, which he calls the “singular intellectual.” The singular intellectual makes countermoves in order to preserve political life. This is the truth-teller who negotiates the space of politics and philosophy, of both governing others and oneself, and who, Balibar writes, “engages historical *singularities*, in other words moments of actuality: an intellectual who is neither ‘universal,’ nor ‘specific,’ but situates himself *beyond* that metaphysical distinction in his way of living and of discourse. An intellectual who tries to say things about the present, about his rights and obligations, about the intolerable, and about the possibilities that may emerge.”¹⁴

Balibar cautions that this model risks veering toward what he calls the “counter-expert” or the “counselor to social movements” (analogous to the counselor to the prince). It is a risky position, he warns. The danger is becoming a backseat driver to political movements—an armchair advisor to resistance. When it works, it can change everything; at other times, it is useless and derisory.¹⁵ What it promises, though, is a corrective to the democratic form, an agonistic counterpoint to too-facile agreement—assuming, Balibar notes ominously, that the political conditions still allow for the singular intellectual.

Balibar contrasts this model with the Habermasian ideal of communicative action: there is, with the singular intellectual, no attempt to universalize any principles, but rather to challenge and give voice to contradiction. It is, in this sense, the very counterpoint of a Habermasian discourse ethic. It does not seek rational agreement or eventual convergence on norms. It serves instead to contradict and contest—but in that contradiction, it keeps the political space alive. It has conflict, not consensus, as its guiding star. The idea is that contradiction is essential to maintaining political life.

The model of the singular intellectual that Balibar proposes intrigues me. It has

something that is attractive, but also worrisome. From a first impression, it feels too self-absorbed, and I find the model of the truth-teller a bit too self-righteous. What I am telling is not the truth, but an interpretation, as I will show—one that is tied to my political project. To be sure, the universal intellectual has little appeal to me because of the problems of universalization—I will get to those. But in addition, both the specific and the singular intellectual have problems. They are too likely to veer into the role of “counselor in uprisings.” It is that model I want to resist. I cannot counsel uprisings. I cannot tell others what to do. I cannot advise militants. I can only confront my own praxis.

So instead, I propose the model of the critical praxis theorist or critical theoretic practitioner: a reflexive way of being that *turns the analysis entirely on my own practices and confronts only my praxis and my critical theory*. To theoretically confront my actions and practically confront my theorizing—that is the way of being to which I aspire. And it carries with it an obligation, for me, to engage in critical praxis, not just critical theory.

So, for instance, in the face of the Yellow Vest movement in France in 2018–2019, many critical thinkers had a lot to say about the movement itself and what it should do. The fact is, many of the protesters expressed a desire for greater equality and fair treatment, especially for the disadvantaged in society and the precarious, as well as anger at the country’s neoliberal policies and a desire for plebian institutions, such as a citizen-initiated referendum process. As a result, many critical thinkers on the Left supported the movement. Étienne Balibar and Antonio Negri aptly described it as a “*contre-pouvoir*” (counterpower), perhaps one of the only counterpowers in French politics at the time.¹⁶ In an early essay published on December 13, 2018, Balibar presented a diagnosis of the movement, locating it within the present crisis of neoliberalism and drawing its Gramscian element as a potential “reversal of hegemony.” He ended that piece by offering guidance as to how the movement could gain momentum, suggesting that mayors and municipalities should “open their doors to the local organization of the movement, and declare[] themselves ready to pass on its demands or proposals to the government.”¹⁷

I would take a different angle. I have no standing, nor any interest in assuming the position of the counselor to uprisings—whether as a general, specific, or singular intellectual.¹⁸ I do not consider myself—nor would I want to present myself—as a public intellectual advisor; instead, I am simply someone who acts, who implicates himself, who rises up at times, breaks silence at others, and litigates most often. I cannot counsel or critique other people’s struggles. I can only critique my own political engagements. I cannot do critical philosophical work on other people’s political engagements, only on my own. This imposes on me, I believe, a duty to act—to engage politically, to perform praxis, as the very precondition to

critique, but critique and praxis *of my own actions*.

So the questions that I would raise are different, but pointed, and pointed at myself: When I was at the Étoile in Paris myself during one of the *Actes* of the Yellow Vest movement, why did I not sport a yellow vest? Why did I not consider myself part of the movement? Why did I decide to be an observer, or at most an ally, and not a protester? Those are the questions, or the form of engagement, that I demand of myself. It is not to advise or give counsel, not merely to diagnose, and not to theorize their praxes, but to confront my own actions with critical theory; and not to presume that where I come out will be useful to others. I feel that I must do this for my own praxis and theory—for a critical praxis theory.

After all, the Yellow Vest movement at the time challenged many of the contemporary political formations that I target in my own political interventions and writings. It aimed at the ills of neoliberalism and the start-up, Uberized culture that does not provide for the welfare of ordinary people. It targeted police excess and the police state. I've been challenging that in the United States for decades. If you listen closely, for a moment, to some of the grievances of the Yellow Vests, you clearly hear those of the Occupy Wall Street movement. So the question that I want to pose to myself is not "What should they do?" but rather, "Why am I not donning a yellow vest?"

This reflexivity, I would argue, is the point of departure for critical theory. It lay at the origin of Max Horkheimer's intervention: to understand how the critical theorist, located in and shaped by history, can transform history through theory and practice. It is central to Foucault's genealogical method and to the new wave of critical theory in the 1960s.¹⁹ It is, as I will show in [chapter 5](#), at the core of the interventions of later critical theorists, such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Seyla Benhabib, Amy Allen, and Rahel Jaeggi. It is at the heart of critical philosophy and transcends all of the later internecine epistemological battles between the Frankfurt School, poststructuralists, postcolonial and queer theorists. And in terms of its implications for the role of the intellectual, it motivates an alternative even to Balibar's singular intellectual.

Foucault, as you recall, was not in favor of proposing. As he explained in an interview with Christian Panier and Pierre Watté in Louvain, on May 14, 1981, he did not believe in telling others what to do, or even signaling by his own commitments what others should do: "I confess that I do not subscribe to the idea of the intellectual intervening or assuming the role of someone who gives lessons or advice regarding matters of political choice—it doesn't sit well with me. I think people are grown-up enough to choose for themselves who they vote for. To say: 'I am an intellectual and I vote for Mr. So-and-so, and therefore you should vote for Mr. So-and-so,' strikes me as a rather astonishing attitude, a kind of arrogance of the intellectual."²⁰ On the other hand, as you will recall, Foucault was comfortable

with his books serving others if they found something of interest in them. As he said at times, he wrote for users, not readers. He hoped, perhaps aspired, that his books could be useful to others, that his ideas would have resonance. So he told Panier and Watté: “On the other hand, if for any number of reasons an intellectual thinks that his work, his analysis, his reflections, his way of acting or thinking about things can shed light on a particular situation, social domain, or conjunction of circumstances, and that he can bring to bear his theoretical and practical contributions on them, then in that case one can draw political consequences.... I think that if he wants to, the intellectual can contribute important elements to the perception and critique of things, from which certain political choices would then naturally follow, if people are so inclined.”²¹

To me, even this is too arrogant. It still views critical work as giving lessons or advice, but for others to discover. It still anticipates that the critical theoretic work will be useful to *others*. It merely displaces the didactic element onto the reader.

I would like to carve out a different space: my theoretical work is intended to push me and my praxis. I do not believe or presume that any readers will think that it sheds light on theirs. Then why publish, you may ask? Why discuss this critical praxis theory in public? The answer is: to stake out a personal space opposed to all those who think they can tell me what is to be done, without giving up on the ambition to critical praxis. It is not to serve as an illustration, an exemplar, or a loadstar; not to shed light for others; nor to serve as a Diogenes. The purpose, it turns out, is to create a space for me to proceed differently and to create space to hear others.

In his discussion with Panier and Watté at Louvain in 1981, Foucault put the theory-praxis question in terms that are pretty close to the space that I am trying to carve out for myself. I will cite the full passage, as it is important, before drawing the distinctions:

When I was a student, I was struck by the fact that during that period we were in a profoundly Marxist atmosphere where the problem of the link between theory and practice was absolutely at the center of all theoretical discussions.

It seems to me that there was perhaps an easier way, or I would say a more immediately practical way, of posing the question of the relationship between theory and practice correctly, and that was to carry it out directly in one's own practice. In this sense, I could say that I have always insisted that my books be, in one sense, fragments of an autobiography. My books have always been my personal problems with madness, the prison, and sexuality.

Second, I have always insisted that there take place within me and for me a kind of back and forth, an interference, an interconnection between practices and the theoretical or historical work I was doing. It seemed to me that I was all the more free to reach deeper and farther into history because I also tied the questions I was

asking to practice, in an immediate and contemporary way. It was because I spent a certain time in psychiatric hospitals that I wrote *The Birth of the Clinic*. With regard to prisons, I began to do a certain number of things, and then I wrote *Discipline and Punish*.

I also took a third precaution: during the period when I pursued these theoretical and historical analyses exclusively in relation to the questions that I had specifically asked myself, I always insisted that this theoretical work not dictate rules with regard to contemporary practice, and that it pose questions. Take the book on madness, for example: its description and analysis end in the years 1814 to 1815. Thus, the book did not appear to be a critique of contemporary psychiatric institutions, but I knew their functioning well enough that I could question their history. It seems to me that the history I wrote was sufficiently detailed for it to pose questions for those who currently live in the institution.²²

There is much that I admire in this formulation, but I would not embrace it as is. I definitely agree with the overarching ambition to live the relationship between theory and praxis in one's own practice. I also agree that theory should not dictate rules to praxis or vice versa. But I am not satisfied with turning first and foremost to my books as illustrations of practice, nor merely to lived experience.²³ I am also concerned about the notion of autobiography *tout court*. Overall, I worry that Foucault's formulation does not push enough toward critical practice. The balance seems off, in my view, or at least for myself. I am not suggesting what anyone else should do, but for myself, the resulting balance does not feel as if it is sufficiently engaged in political action.

I must continue to litigate, to advocate, to militate—in addition to researching and writing books that engage practices and institutions and to teaching and creating critical space. By *litigate*, I do not simply mean filing lawsuits and representing clients. That is too often merely defensive or reactive, and not sufficiently proactive. Plus, if the courts are stacked and impenetrable, these actions may be pointless. I use this term to refer to using the law proactively, in a country where the rule of law is the compass—even if that principle is only an illusion. By *advocate*, by *militate*, I set no limits. By *writing*, I intend to confront my praxis with critical theory and also to imagine ways forward. By *teaching*, I express the hope that I can support and encourage students to become social justice warriors as much as possible. By *creating a critical space*, I mean to animate a space of critical praxis theory that allows others to speak equally and be heard.

Contrary to the Enlightenment, to liberal tenets, or even to Habermasian communicative theory, there are no rational principles, no universal charters of civil and political rights, and no universalizable maxims that will protect us from a downward spiral into authoritarianism. There is no institutional fix, no discursive principle, no permanent or lasting legal protection against tyranny. Reason has been eclipsed far too often. Ideal theory is just that—ideal. And the rule of law will

not save us; it is plied instead by brilliant lawyers who bend it to the will of their handlers, as we witnessed so starkly during the presidency of George W. Bush.

Our political condition does not achieve the kind of equilibrium characterized by liberal political theory. Instead, it is a constant, never-ending struggle to shape distributions of resources. It is an unending political competition, one that never reaches a stable equilibrium, but rather churns endlessly, dramatically, and often violently, redistributing wealth, security, influence, liberty, well-being—and, yes, life itself. This is a central insight of a critical praxis theory, and it remains as sound today as it was 100 years ago: our political condition is a constant battle to realize contested visions and ambitions for life and social existence. We are steeped in these ongoing political struggles. We are shaped by them. We are implicated in them. We transform them.

These struggles are most often fought, and won, on the basis of illusions: by getting people to believe so deeply in the truth of social facts that they are then willing to sacrifice their lives for their beliefs. In recent decades, with the collapse of communism and the rise of neoliberalism, the illusion of free markets has done most of the work. But today, the specter of immigrant invasion, of loss of white identity, and of the Islamification of the West is increasingly driving many more people to join extreme-right populist movements. We know this. Critical theory has labored over these epistemological matters for decades. We no longer need to fight among ourselves over these basics. We no longer need to replot these epistemological points.

Instead, we need now to turn to the most difficult task at hand—the ambition of critical theory: to reframe and articulate a new critical praxis theory. I offer in [part IV](#) an idiosyncratic and individual proposal for critical praxis. And, somewhat like Bruno Latour, I too will end my urgent call for critical theory and praxis in these urgent times with an invitation:

There, I've finished. Now, if you wish, it's your turn to present yourself, tell us a little about where you would like to land and with whom you agree to share a dwelling place.²⁴

I might not say it in exactly the same way as Latour. Perhaps I might emphasize not just with whom, but how you might agree to share your existence. But the invitation remains open.

I have many firm convictions that will come out in the course of this book. For instance, I don't believe in a Marxian philosophy of history, nor in the idea of human progress. In fact, I think that, with the global climate crisis and the threat of pandemics, we are in a worse position than ever before. I don't believe that a revolution would succeed now in the United States, but I do believe that we face a

Counterrevolution. I don't believe in physical violence, although I know all politics are inevitably violent. But these specific positions are all secondary to the larger ambition of this work: I believe that I must act and engage in praxis. I believe that I cannot do critical theory unless I am engaged in critical practice. I believe I must confront my critical praxis with critical theory, and my critical theory with critical praxis.

Rethinking the Relation Between Theory and Praxis

In reformulating the question "What is to be done?" as "What more am I to do?" I propose a specific relationship between theory and praxis: a constant confrontation between my critical practices and critical theory. Paradoxically, the vision I propose overlaps theoretically with the relationship that Adorno espoused in 1968–1969: a continuous and unresolved dialectical contradiction between theory and praxis. But I embrace it with an entirely different sensibility to action than Adorno had, and I intend to push it in an entirely different direction: I propose to constantly collide and clash my praxis and theory on the model of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN. My goal, in effect, is to collide theory and praxis as if in the Large Hadron Collider.

Some critics might respond that it would be better to do away with the dichotomy altogether, that the theory/praxis divide merely replicates the Cartesian body/mind problem. Jack Halberstam, for instance, directly contests the theory-praxis divide. He challenges the privileged position from which any critical theorists could declare what is to be done or how to change the world. Presuming or accepting the theory-praxis opposition has negative effects, Halberstam argues. When we start from that dichotomy, Halberstam writes, "we cement the opposition between theory and practice and make it seem as if this bounded zone were real, as if people were just waiting to hear from on high about the proper interpretation of Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach,' as if the correct definition of the general strike would resolve the question of how to change things." Halberstam emphasizes that the distinction creates unnecessary hierarchies and counterproductive expectations. He underscores that "getting it right is not a prelude to change; the general strike is ongoing and everywhere, it is spontaneous (contra Luxemburg) and lasting in its form and impact. Furthermore, critique is not the road to enlightenment; enlightenment is not the goal; and the undercommons is not a route to a new politics but the end of politics as such." In a direct rebuke, Halberstam declares: "Denizens of the undercommons do not recognize the distinction between theory and practice that...preoccupies our most canonical

political thinkers such as Marx, Lenin, Foucault, and Arendt.”²⁵

This represents, to my mind, the most direct challenge to this project of a critical praxis theory—or at least the most important challenge that I am drawn to. I am less concerned about the liberal or conservative critique, as both are reactionary. But I am mobilized by the undercommons critique because, at times, I espouse it.²⁶ I agree that knowledge is the product of the hierarchies we inhabit. I agree that meritocracy is an illusion and a product of regimes of truth. I reject the ranking, the hierarchy, and the exploitation of our universities. So the underlying critical theory seems right to me. Yet I would like to imagine that the model of the Large Hadron Collider does not reify the dichotomy but rather blasts it apart. It creates a unified field of critical praxis theory that deconstructs the divide. In this way, the constant contradiction and confrontation produce a fused space of critical praxis, something like a unity of theory and practice—perhaps that unity of theory and practice that Horkheimer aspired to before moving away from it after World War II, or that Marcuse spoke of. It may be possible to avoid the pitfalls that Jack Halberstam identifies if we speak, in this Marcusean way, of a unified field of theory and praxis.

I too would like to imagine that praxis does not wait for theory. I would like to believe that I can and must act first, and that there is no legitimacy to theorizing about praxis, to critical theory itself, absent a militant engagement. I can and should theorize only about *my* actions. I also want to imagine that we can instantiate now something beyond politics—an end of politics. That was, in part, what I believed that the Occupy movement was doing so brilliantly. So I say: Accentuate the tension and contradiction because they are so productive. They reveal so much about what we are doing and thinking. They do so much. Rather than dissolve, I say accentuate and put them into a virtual Large Hadron Collider. Smash them to pieces. I believe that this idea of a “unified field” is possible and can be distinguished from the other four ways of relating theory and praxis. As I will demonstrate, those other four models are more grounded on the dichotomy.

Critical Theory as Praxis

The first model views critical theoretic work itself—for instance, the diagnosis of crises moments, the exercise of exposing illusions, the work of ideology critique—as a form of critical praxis in its own right. This is different than pure contemplation or traditional philosophy. It is more than pure philosophical practice that does not even engage the real world or the present times, more than abstract theory or philosophy for its own sake—a form of philosophy that antedates the “attitude of modernity,” does not concern itself with the present, and does not seek to address

social problems. Critical theory as a form of praxis, by contrast, considers that the critical work itself affects or transforms reality. The reflective nature of critical theory means that the theorist is necessarily situated within a historical transformation that he or she forms part of and fuels. So critical thinking itself is an active task. Other practitioners, afterward and elsewhere, may find something to use—but that is not part of the critical theoretic work. Theorists need look no further than their own conceptual work to see practice in action. There is, in this sense, an autonomy to critical theory.

This resonates with the earlier statement of Foucault: he is providing ideas and tools, and it is up to others to find something of value in them (if they do). I think you also hear this in Horkheimer and Adorno and their resistance to action. It is also reflected in the passage, given earlier, from Honneth. When he writes in *The Idea of Socialism*, “I make no attempt to draw connections to current political constellations and possibilities for action. I will not be dealing with the strategic question of how socialism could influence current political events,” he is essentially drawing a line between the critical intellectual work and implementation or praxis: it will be up to others to figure out how these ideas might be put into action.²⁷

As I will make clear in this work, I reject this first model as too contemplative. Critical theorizing alone is not, in my opinion, sufficiently active and alone does not amount to critical praxis.

Critical Theoretic Implications for Praxis

Alternatively, one could view the task of critical theory as guiding and informing practice. On this view, praxis should be understood as applied theory: the theoretical work comes first, and it has implications for what we should do. This model recalls the Enlightenment view: reason effectively guides our action. Paradoxically, there is a sense in which Horkheimer, in his article “Traditional and Critical Theory,” is doing just that—paradoxically because later, in 1944, he would come down so hard on instrumental reason (the core of his and Adorno’s critique in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). But in 1937, when Horkheimer writes that the proletariat is suffering from illusions and that the task for the theorist is to help the proletariat see straight and bring about social transformation, this can be described fairly as an applied theoretical approach.

Here, critical theory focuses not merely on diagnosing present crises or reformulating critical ideas, but also on proposing avenues and actions to address the crises and bring about social change. This might be something of an equilibrium point on the theoretical side between *theoria* and praxis, where we theorize practice and formulate strategies to address current crises.

The work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri well illustrates this second approach. Their book *Assembly* (2017) functions as a manual for assemblies intended not just to analyze or theorize, but to counsel, advise, and encourage assembly-style social movements. It is a how-to guide, with concrete instructions on how to seize power, organize leadership, and restructure subjectivity and economic production. Hardt and Negri draw on the practices of existing social movements, but not so much to learn from them as to give them direction and correction based on their theoretical work. In other words, their theory is driving their praxis recommendations, rather than the praxes of others driving their theory.

They locate the productivity of “assembly” as a new mode of politics within the power of the “multitude”—the notion that grounded a previous book of theirs—in effect suggesting that contemporary social movements are verifying or actualizing their conception of the multitude. In the process, they hope to stimulate and guide these insurrectional social movements. Their work is, in the words of Joshua Smeltzer, “a blueprint for empowering the multitude as the means of establishing a more just society.”²⁸ Their strategies, such as inverted leadership and claimed entrepreneurship, are individually to be viewed “as a simple operator of assembly within a multitude that is self-organized and cooperates in freedom and equality to produce wealth.”²⁹ Hardt and Negri propose a list of concrete organizational advice (almost commands) for Leftist revolt, derived primarily from their theoretical work, as well as from Negri’s Marxist militant background.

Confronted with leaderless social movements like Occupy Wall Street or the Arab Spring, Hardt and Negri advise against giving up on leadership. Rather than going leaderless, they argue that one should “transform the role of leadership by inverting strategy and tactics”: let the multitude decide on strategy, but the leaders decide on tactics. Do not give up on institutions and organizations, they declare; instead, build new institutions—specifically nonsovereign ones. They continue, “Smashing the state means...creating political and administrative institutions that immanently organize the collective, democratic decision-making of the entire population.”³⁰

Most important, Hardt and Negri argue that social movements today need to seize power. They write that many of the current social movements focus all their attention on the movement itself, its general assemblies, and the insulated world of the resistance movement rather than on taking power from the state. Many groups create a hermetically sealed space of protest and militancy—*en vase clos*—separate and independent from ordinary politics and political power. With Occupy, for instance, there was a palpable and deliberate resistance to power, legislative politics, or party politics—to any engagement with conventional political representation and practices. Hardt and Negri push in a very different direction: Leftist movements must take power. They must seize the conventional

instruments, institutions, and pathways of politics. “We have little sympathy with those who want to maintain their purity and keep their hands clean by refusing power,” they proclaim. “In order to change the world we need to take power.”³¹

In other words, Hardt and Negri do not merely theorize what is going on. They draw on their critical theory to counsel, advise, and revise the strategies of these movements. It is in this sense that we could say that they are *applying* critical theory to praxis. There is, however, a vanguard intellectualism here that seems out of date and somewhat unconvincing. Hardt and Negri are, without doubt, brilliant theorists, but there is no reason to believe that they are good strategists or authoritative practitioners, or that the implications of their brilliant theorizing are right. There is no reason to follow them into battle. And that’s the problem, often, with applied theory: a lack of credibility. Slavoj Žižek falls victim to this as well. He advocates for a direct relationship from theory to praxis; his is the model of critical theory telling us what to do. In his essay in *The Idea of Communism*, volume 3, Žižek writes, “There are numerous cases in which representing (speaking for) others is a necessity.”³² Žižek does not abide by the “step back” idea. Instead, he embraces a form of Leninism that dictates practice. The problem, again, is that there is no basis to trust his strategic judgment, no reason to defer to his application of critical theory.

Theorizing Praxis

Toward the other end of the spectrum, some critical theorists theorize praxis: practice is something that we interpret, essentially after the fact. Theory comes in afterward to help us understand practices, make sense of them. In this view, it is not that theory can guide practice, but rather that practice has a certain kind of autonomy and independence, which allow it to be interpreted and theorized. We can learn things from praxis. There is often, in this approach, a thoughtful valorization of the practices in a manner that showcases them as a possible way of moving forward. The practices that are studied serve as exemplars. Without advocating for them explicitly, theorizing them serves to showcase them. The exercise, in this sense, is not purely theoretical. It has a veiled action orientation.

Banu Bargu’s theorizing of death fasts and forms of self-immolation, and Massimiliano Tomba’s writings on insurgent universalities and his ongoing project on struggles over water rights in South America, are undoubtedly illustrative of this approach.³³ Bargu’s book, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*, published in 2014, serves as a powerful illustration of this relationship. She analyzes forms of resistance that she categorizes under the rubric of the “weaponization of life”: the hunger strike or death fast, self-mutilation and self-

immolation, and other forms of human sacrifice. Bargu calls these “necroresistance” and analyzes them in relation to the structures of power within which they emerge, which she calls “the biopoliticization of sovereignty.”

Bargu performs, in essence, a kind of autopsy of a philosophical nature of the actions that produce death in order to make sense of them and our present political condition. From the perspective of the relation of theory and praxis, she theorizes praxis to understand it. The directionality of her project is *from praxis to theory* in order for theory to enlighten praxis. This is evident throughout her methodological discussion. Bargu writes, for instance, “This book therefore explores the death fast struggle by placing self-destructive techniques of political action at the center of its inquiry *in order to theorize this highly particular form of struggle in which life is forged into a weapon.*” “In order to theorize”: the objective is to understand by means of critical theory. The set of questions that guides Bargu’s inquiry is equally revealing: “What are the reasons for choosing such tactics? What are the justifications provided for this choice? What are their ethical and political implications?”³⁴

Bargu engages in categorization, distinguishing defensive from offensive uses of human weapons. She engages in interpretation, suggesting that these forms of death fasts are *not* nonviolent. She is concerned “with understanding their relation to the conditions out of which they emerge.” She is engaged in an interpretive task—not to judge but to understand. Specifically, the task is to understand “in order to deploy [these] findings toward the theorization of this emergent repertoire of action that increasingly stamps the radical struggles of our present.” We are firmly in the space of the theorization of praxis: “I theorize the self-destructive practices that forge life into a weapon as a specific modality of resistance.” Listen to the ultimate payoff: “Through this inquiry, the book attempts to interpret the growing centrality of a novel set of practices of resistance that have entered the political scene in Turkey and to scrutinize their meaning, function, and effects, without whose analysis both the opposition of political prisoners and the reaction of the Turkish state are bound to remain opaque.”³⁵

Bargu’s theoretical work enriches our understanding not only of how power circulates in society today, but also of how resistance circulates, so we see the resistance as not simply trying to “make life better” in opposition to biosovereignty and the regulation of life, but to implicate and draw out the centrality of death as well. But what it does, principally, is theorize praxis. Perhaps this is essential in a charged context like this—one situated between, on the one hand, the total domination of life in solitary confinement in supermax prisons, and on the other hand, the only remaining weapon to resist the domination, life itself. In any event, though, this work represents the *theorization of practice*.

Similarly, Tomba’s book *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of*

Modernity seeks to unearth alternative forms of praxis and theorize them in order to showcase them—from the Paris Communards’ use of medieval types of self-government, to the peasant communities and workers’ councils in 1918 Russia, to the Zapatistas’ experiments in self-government in Mexico.³⁶ Moreover, Tomba and Bargu’s larger ongoing project at the University of California, Santa Cruz, has the ambition of discussing actually-existing critical practices that arise globally in both the South and the North from activist interventions, and to analyze them as a way to highlight them—in other words, to theorize new forms of praxis and offer them as exemplars.

The Autonomy of Praxis

Furthest along the spectrum, some critical theorists believe that praxis is essentially autonomous of critical theory and our theoretical inquiries will have (and can have) no effect on praxis. The idea is not to theorize forms of praxis as a way to potentially guide our actions, but simply a way to demonstrate the autonomy of action.

Joshua Clover is a good illustration. His work documents where praxis is headed. It has a predictive element because he is able to show the independent factors—the forces that drive praxis. But his analysis does not and will not have a feedback effect on our actions: the praxis that he identifies will happen, regardless of whether we theorize it, regardless of whether we even see it. In this sense, from this perspective, practice itself may be considered autonomous, and theory superfluous. Theory is derivative of practice. Practice happens regardless of whether we theorize.

That autonomy is central to Clover’s intervention in *Riot. Strike. Riot*. In conversation with Clover, I proposed to him that his book could be interpreted as advocating the autonomy of praxis—to which he responded that on the contrary, it more likely represented the autonomy of theory. Praxis goes on, regardless of our theorizing. It is the theorizing that is autonomous—and in that sense, perhaps, irrelevant to the ongoing praxis. Critical theory is so immanent, it is almost outside the space of praxis. As Clover writes in his introduction: “Theory is immanent in struggle; often enough it must hurry to catch up to a reality that lurches ahead.”³⁷

In his work, Clover traces the increasing practice of riots and looting as forms of uprising tied to our current political-economic condition of neoliberal consumption capitalism. According to Clover, this represents a parallel history of praxis and political economy—a history in which modalities of uprising are shaped by economic conditions and evolve as a result of the necessary evolution of economic history.

Clover offers a three-part story: During the medieval and early modern periods, marked by an economy of circulation of goods, forms of uprising were dominated by the mob riot, the type of violent event described and theorized through the lens of moral economy by the English historian E. P. Thompson. Early capitalism and the Industrial Revolution brought about an economy of production accompanied by labor movements, syndicalism, and the modality of the strike as the dominant form of struggle against capitalism. With the neoliberal turn in the 1970s and the transformation of the advanced capitalist economy into a service economy dominated once again by the circulation of goods, revolt turned to a new form of riot, what Clover calls “riot prime,” that involved urban youth attacking the commercial symbols of consumption. These included the London riots of 2011, the *émeutes* of the French *banlieues* in 2005 and 2009, and the rioting in Ferguson, Missouri, in Baltimore, and elsewhere in the United States. These are the direct product of the crises of capitalism at the turn of this century: “*crisis signals a shift of capital’s center of gravity into circulation, both theoretically and practically, and riot is in the last instance to be understood as a circulation struggle, of which the price-setting struggle and the surplus rebellion are distinct, if related, forms,*” Clover emphasizes.³⁸

The historical trajectory that Clover describes, then, is directly reflected in the title of his book, *Riot. Strike. Riot*: “riots” during the medieval and early modern period of a circulatory economy, “strikes” throughout capitalism, and now the “riot prime” in our age of postindustrial neoliberal capitalism. What is important in his thesis is that the economic dimension drives the praxis: forms of uprising are determined by economic conditions and evolve regardless of human intervention—or critical theory. We face a distinct future of praxis, regardless of theory. “The riot, the blockade, the barricade, the occupation. The commune. These are what we will see in the next five, fifteen, forty years. The list is not new.”³⁹ The space of praxis is, in this sense, autonomous. History has its direction. We theorists are just observers who will not affect or change the direction of history. Praxis will happen, whether we theorize or not.

Confrontation and the Unified Field

Somewhere, distinct from these four approaches, lies a fifth path, where theory and praxis can be interpreted as being so much in confrontation that they form a unified field: the two form an irreconcilable tension, a constant contradiction that nourishes both but does not entail any directionality from one to the other. This could be described as a dialectical opposition, or even a confrontation imagined through the lens of pure negativity, as in Adorno’s negative dialectics.⁴⁰ But it need

not carry such a theoretical burden, nor such negativity, as I will argue in [chapter 5](#). The relation is more immediate, constant, and productive, a pure collision that can produce a unified field. Critical theory does not guide practice or enlighten us about practice. It challenges praxis by trying to layer categories and concepts on it, but in the resistance to those efforts, theory grows and changes shape. On the other hand, praxis also confronts critical theory, and in that encounter, it too changes and grows. This may be close to the idea of a contradiction and confrontation that Adorno had in mind in his “Marginalia on Theory and Praxis” and that Horkheimer expressed in *Eclipse of Reason*. But I push it in a fundamentally different direction, with a sharply different sensibility to action.

Collision, contradiction, and confrontation: this is where I would situate myself. As I detail in [chapter 18](#), it is in the conflict between my praxis and critical theory that I develop and push both. By participating in the Occupy movement and speaking at the open university at the foot of the Chicago Board of Trade, by supporting protesters and counseling those arrested at Grant Park, I confronted notions of civil disobedience and ungovernability and developed a critical theory of political disobedience to understand the new grammar of occupation and leaderlessness. By struggling alongside the Yellow Vest movement, I confronted and resuscitated the practice of the fellow traveler. By working with Noah Smith-Drelich on our §1983 civil rights lawsuit against North Dakota law enforcement for violating the assembly and protest rights at the Standing Rock reservation, we confronted critical theory with legal practice, deploying the new language of water protectors rather than protesters. In my decades of representing the condemned in Alabama, I tackled the contradictions within legal-liberalism and ultimately expanded my target to the punitive society writ large. The process of theorization challenges and pushes my own praxis and vice versa: trying to imagine political disobedience, comparing Occupy Wall Street to Gandhi, King, or Thoreau, ends up highlighting and problematizing features of my own praxis. But the praxis also confronts my critical theories and challenges them. It is a constant struggle back and forth.

Ultimately, there is only one viable space for me: the confrontation, the clash. As a critic, I must engage, I must practice, and I must critique and reflect. I agonize over this relation between theory and praxis. That is critical theory to me. When I am not doing that, I am not a critical theorist—I am merely an academic. In the end, the first model of contemplation as praxis is too docile, too chastened, too unengaged. The fourth model is a phantasm: the idea that history marches on its own and that praxis will just evolve in coordination with history is an illusion. And the second model, the idea that theory could guide praxis, is pure hubris. It privileges intellectuals over militants and practitioners. I need to act, to litigate, to militate in order to change the world. I need to theorize. I need to place the two in

conflict—without telling others what to do. I need to theorize and contest my own actions. In the end, I cannot tell other people what to do. I have to reformulate the very question: no longer “What is to be done?” but rather “What more shall I do? What work am I doing? How is what I am doing working—or not?”

Constructing a New Critical Praxis Theory

While the aim of this work is to push critical theory back toward praxis, the starting point must be to propose a resolution of the internecine battles and struggles for influence that currently plague critical philosophy. As I mentioned earlier, critical theorists have been bogged down for decades in an epistemological detour that now has given rise to clannish politics between its various branches—Frankfurt School, Foucaultian, deconstructive, Lacanian, feminist, postcolonial, queer—or worse, has descended to mere gossip about its illuminati. Critical theory today is itself in crisis—and that has to be resolved first.

I am by no means the only one to diagnose this malaise. Amy Allen also has taken it as her point of departure in *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, published in 2016. Allen maintains that the inheritors of the Frankfurt School are wedded to a foundationalist belief in progress that is at odds with other critical theories and has prevented them from engaging in dialogue with those other branches. Their belief in progress, Allen argues, has resulted in “the failure of Frankfurt School critical theory to engage substantively with one of the most influential branches of critical theory,” namely postcolonial and decolonial theory, critical race theory, and queer theory.⁴¹ Allen decries the “long-running feud” and denounces “the ongoing family quarrel between Frankfurt School critical theory and French critical theory.”⁴² Seyla Benhabib also recognizes the factious nature of the critical theory field today. She too refers to “the contentious plurality of approaches caught between the critical theory of the Frankfurt School proper, on the one hand, and Foucaultian genealogy and Derridean deconstruction, on the other.” These are precisely the factions vying for influence today—in Benhabib’s words, a “contentious and rivalrous plurality.”⁴³ I would argue that they are more than mere rivalries today. The contentions have become roadblocks.

How, then, can we get past these long-running feuds? That is one of the most important challenges today for critical philosophy. One approach would be to allow every faction to bloom. At times, Benhabib seems to embrace that route, writing that “we have to accept the *legitimate pluralization of critical theory approaches* today.”⁴⁴ But I believe that it would be better to resolve the epistemological

disagreement and get back to the task at hand: trying to change the world. Accordingly, in this work, I will first elaborate a reconstruction of critical theory and its reorientation toward praxis. I will propose that we understand critical theory, at its core, as an exercise in stripping illusions that lays bare and calls for an assessment of values, as well as an analysis of strategies and tactics, to achieve an egalitarian form of human emancipation. In this final section, I will prefigure the reconstructive argument as succinctly as possible.

Critical theory has been wracked, at least since the early twentieth century, by a deep tension between two originary tendencies: the first toward a reflexivity and historical constructivism, and the second toward emancipatory horizons, such as Marxism, that bore an element of scientism. It is that very tension that pushed first-generation critical theorists like Horkheimer into an epistemological direction in order to reconcile how the subjective self-understanding of workers obstructed the Marxian march of history. This led Horkheimer and the early Frankfurt School toward a critique of ideology and, later, toward discourse ethics, both of which served to normatively ground the enterprise; but it also brought wave after wave of antifoundational challenges, counterpositivist reactions, and critical efforts aimed at the elements of scientism and Marxism originally inserted in critical theory. These latter challenges sought to loosen the hold of Marxian epistemology, producing theories of knowledge-power, of *epistemes*, of desire, of deconstruction, of regimes of truth, and embroiling critical theorists in infinite epistemological debate and controversy.

The various epistemological approaches, however, all belabored a similar set of points that could be stripped of their Hegelian clothing and of their normative foundationalism: first, people's beliefs about their conditions—about their social, political, and economic conditions—have effects of reality and shape their behavior. People are even willing to sacrifice their lives for what they believe in, politically or ethically. Second, people's beliefs are shaped by historical conditions. People are shaped by the political, economic, and social conditions that they themselves interpret and study. The reflexivity thereby precludes any universal truths in these domains; it only allows for historically situated contexts. However, third, there is no necessary direction of change, nor any universal metric or criterion to judge the truth-value of these beliefs. There is no teleology to history: we are not necessarily headed toward the collapse of capitalism or neoliberalism, nor are we necessarily headed toward autocratic or fascistic regimes. Here too, humans can shape their political reality. We are not necessarily headed to climatic apocalypse either. Humans can intervene and change the course of history.

What people believe and consider true, then, shapes and is shaped by their social, economic, and political conditions—and it changes. These conditions are powerful in that they shape people's behavior; but as they evolve and change—as

people evolve and change—people’s beliefs get denaturalized and show themselves to have been illusions: illusory beliefs that prevent people from realizing change or reshaping history and their world. What people consider true today, politically or socially, may be shown to be an illusion. In fact, it most likely will be shown to be an illusion at some future point in history.

At the heart of critical theory, then, is this reflexivity, originally introduced into critical theory, which calls for a radical theory of illusions. Whether we ultimately call this a theory of ideology or of regimes of truth matters little—so long as we do not reinfuse that concept with necessity (i.e., with the idea that there is a necessary contradiction inherent to the object of critique that necessarily will push history in any particular direction).⁴⁵ The label is not important. What matters is that we do not reify what is unveiled or stop being reflexive. What matters is that we not turn critical theory into a touchstone.

Precisely because of its reflexivity, historicity, and constructivism, critical theory is not a *basanos* that creates and tests truth, but a constant critique that unveils recurring illusions. *Basanos* refers originally to the touchstone that was used in ancient practice to test the purity of gold. This was the practice of the moneychangers—and there is undoubtedly a link between these practices and money itself as a measure of truth.⁴⁶ But we must ensure that critical theory does not become a method for truth. We need to get beyond the idea that critical theory, as the unmasking of illusions, unveils the truth. Rather, it unveils a situation that itself eventually needs to be reexamined. Rather than get stuck in internecine battles over epistemology and truth, we need to get beyond them—and back to the main ambition: to change the world.

First, then, a reconstructed critical theory precisely represents an endless unveiling of illusions to demonstrate how our beliefs distribute resources and material conditions. It traces the effects of reality of our beliefs and material practices, recognizing that, as it unveils illusions, it creates new ones that will need to be unpacked later. It is relentless in this way. It engages in a form of recursive unmasking—an infinite regress—that endlessly exposes the distributional effects of belief systems and material conditions. It entails, in this sense, a *radical critical philosophy of illusions*.

It may feel at times, especially today in these times of utter crisis, that we could dispense with critical theory and the unveiling of illusions. The rise of such explicit hatred and prejudice as we have seen with the New Right, some suggest, no longer calls for subtle critical analysis. As Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus observed in 2009, “Eight years of the Bush regime may have hammered home the point that not all situations require the subtle ingenuity associated with symptomatic reading.”⁴⁷ The tools of critique, to many, have begun to appear unnecessary in the pitch of battle. “The assumption that domination can only do its

work when veiled, which may once have sounded almost paranoid, now has a nostalgic, even utopian ring to it," Best and Marcus note.⁴⁸ But this, I will argue, is precisely the wrong approach. Rather than abandon, it is time to rejuvenate and reformulate critical theory, because, as I will show, it is the only theoretical tradition that pursues equality, social justice, and autonomy. It is always at the darkest moment that critical theory rises from the ashes. It is that time again.

Second, in the same way that reconstructed critical theory, understood as a radical theory of illusions, liberates us from unfounded scientific foundations and tendencies, it also frees us from the foundational constraints of the old utopias of critical philosophy. The proposed resolution of the epistemological controversies can serve as a model and can motivate and guide the normative analysis. When we unmask and unveil, we are in fact proposing. Exposing an illusion is itself a proposition. It involves an affirmative choice: what to unveil and how? That moment of critique itself represents a choice that will undoubtedly, eventually, recirculate power and impose a new form of domination. It must, of course, inevitably. When we unmask, indeed, we propose a vocabulary, a grammar, new ideas and ideologies that will eventually have effects of domination. Yes, in this, Foucault was surely right. When we propose, we inevitably impose. But when we critique, we also propose and impose. So we cannot stop there. We must evaluate and assess what we are doing, and also act, constantly reevaluating and critiquing how our actions reshape relations of power and the critical vision for the future. To believe that we could avoid these effects of domination is to ignore the reality of critique. So we cannot stop there. We need to constantly address and reexamine the critical horizon—or what historically had been called utopia.

It turns out that there is no unique form of political economy that satisfies the ambition of critical theory. There is no one type of economic arrangement that fulfills the utopian vision—not socialism, Keynesianism, post-Keynesian economics, or even (at least so I would argue) the idea of communism. All actually existing economies are regulated, each in their unique way, and they each produce material distributions that are the direct result of the particular microrules and regulations of that particular economic arrangement, and not of the abstract regime type. A state-controlled economy can distribute to its *apparatschik*, just as a privately owned corporation can distribute to its workers: it is not the abstract regime type, but the detailed mechanisms and regulations of the specific regime, that shape the social order. All that we can judge, as critical theorists, is how close an actually existing economic arrangement approximates the values and ideals of critical philosophy. In this sense, critical theory calls for judgment about the values that a political economic arrangement instantiates through its material outcomes and distributions, not for a particular type of political economy.

Hand-in-hand with a radical theory of illusions, then, reconstructed critical

theory must be agnostic about the abstract type of political economic regime, but adamant about the values it produces. It entails, in this sense, *an unswerving evaluation and assessment of values*. It addresses, head on, Nietzsche's question of the value of values and responds: the value of these critical values is the creation of a more just and equal society, marked by less domination, oppression, and social differential, and by the opportunity for each and every person to flourish and achieve her or his greatest potential. The value of critical values is achieving this more just and equal society. It calls, in this sense, for *a radical critical philosophy of values*.

Third, in terms of critical praxis, a reconstructed critical theory also distances itself from the anointed practices from the past—vanguard parties and proletariat revolution. It calls instead for entirely situated and contextualized analyses of how to push specific, really existing political economic arrangements—whether they can be labeled capitalist, post-Keynesian, socialist, or communist—in the direction of our critical values. Each historical, geographical, and political situation is different, calling for different strategies and tactics—with nothing off the table. Politics is a constant battle over values, and we are all inevitably in a state of competition to realize our ideals. In such a contested space, it is possible to develop tactics only in a situated and contextualized way. Because there is no war to be won, but rather an endless series of struggles, critical theory must focus on strategies and tactics. These are not portable or generalizable. What might have been appropriate in 1930s Germany was completely different from what worked in 1940s India. In the latter context, nonviolent resistance may have been appropriate; in the former, it would have been madness. The methods of struggle cannot be universalized. The answer is not a vanguard party, a leaderless movement, nonviolent resistance, or any general mode of uprising, in the abstract. There is no one right way to proceed in general terms. We immediately go off track when we seek one generalizable or universal answer to the question. Instead, the question must be answered differently for each situation, specified and contextualized in space and time. There must be a GPS-, a time-, and a date-stamp for every answer.

The upshot is that there is no single, abstract, or universal—or universalizable—answer to the praxis question. In the same way in which reconstructed critical theory overcomes unfounded scientific foundations, the classic question “What is to be done?” must be deanchored and reformulated—and reformulated by each and every one of us in our different time and space. In this sense, reconstructed critical praxis calls for *a radical critical philosophy of strategies and tactics*.

In this book, I propose one such time-, place-, and date-stamped reformulation. In [part IV](#), I reformulate this question by turning it on myself and asking myself what I am doing—in other words, by confronting my own praxis. My answer has to

come from my own confrontation of theory and praxis. I hope that others will reformulate and answer the question with their own time-, place-, and date-stamps wherever they are now—and I aspire to support a forum for those reformulations and answers. Critical theory cannot simply understand our crises and unveil our illusions. It cannot content itself with reflection or contemplation as a form of practice. It must articulate tactics and praxis. Critical times call for radical reevaluation. That is what I propose here: a new vision of critical praxis theory for the twenty-first century.

PART I

Reconstructing Critical Theory

To return critical philosophy to its main task and true ambition—to change the world, not just to interpret it—requires first resolving the epistemological controversies that still plague the critical enterprise today, in order second to reconstruct a critical praxis theory.

Critical theory originally wove together different elements in terms of its method and conception—and, most often, it still does today. Most critical theories were grounded on a reflexive understanding of the critical theorist as an actor situated in history with the capability to affect the course of history through critical praxis. Most of them deployed immanent critique and defetishizing or unmasking critique to try to achieve the goal of human emancipation, recognizing the significant role of beliefs and ideas in the production of oppression and inequality.

From its inception, however, there was a deep tension within critical theory between, on the one hand, aspects of immanent critique and a philosophy of history that pushed in the direction of scientism, and, on the other hand, aspects of defetishizing critique and reflexivity that pushed in the opposite direction of ethics. The first aspects were far more foundational, in an epistemological and normative sense, insofar as they grounded the correctness of the critical theory or the truth of the outcome of the critical analysis on the certainty of a historical trajectory and on quasi-scientific notions of the overcoming of necessary internal contradictions. On the basis of the unfolding of history and a correct social theory, the critical theorist could know for certain the accuracy of the analysis and prescription. By contrast, the second aspects were far less foundational—even antifoundational at times. The unmasking in defetishizing critique did not necessarily reveal truth, but simply unmasked illusions; and reflexivity, in combination with a more fluid conception of history, allowed some contingency both in the facticity of present circumstances and in the way in which critical theorists could transform history.

This deep tension was present in the earliest expressions of critical philosophy—already in Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism, but more importantly in Horkheimer’s original vision for critical theory in 1937. There, one can already find the elements of reflexivity and historical constructivism that were potentially at odds with the scientism of the Marxian analysis, which also was present in Horkheimer’s early writings. That paradoxical combination of reflexivity, historical constructivism, and scientism ultimately pushed critical theory into its epistemological impasse. The *aporia* traverses the long history of critical philosophy, the generational shifts of the Frankfurt School, and the clash with poststructuralist, postcolonial, queer, critical race, and other contemporary critical theories.

In her book *The End of Progress*, Amy Allen traces this tension and the resulting conflict between later generations of the Frankfurt School and thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and postcolonial, queer, and decolonial theorists to the former’s abiding faith in the concept of progress. The notion of moral and political progress as a fact and imperative, Allen argues, prevented critical philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rainer Forst from properly engaging the other strands of postcolonial and queer critical theories. Allen’s thesis is compelling, but, if anything, should be broadened from the specific matter of the concept of progress to the larger question of epistemological foundations. Adorno did not hold a notion of progress (which Allen recognizes—Adorno’s quip that “progress occurs where it ends” is the source of Allen’s book title and epigraph¹) and Horkheimer essentially gave up on progress after the war, both of which suggest that the crux of the problem is broader than the controversy over the idea of progress. Instead, it goes to the overarching problem of a recurring foundationalism in later iterations of Frankfurt School critical theory that expressed itself in both the historiography and normativity of the writings. The real source of the tension—and what pushed critical theory into its epistemological detour—is the recurring struggle over the problem of foundations.

Part I of this work offers a way to reconstruct critical theory as a critical method that indexes the original reflexivity, historicity, and counterpositivism of critical theory, but also liberates it from its tendency to revert to scientism and foundationalism, in an effort to get us beyond the epistemological detour and make possible a more contextual, nimble, and powerful critical approach oriented toward praxis. A reconstructed critical theory embraces the challenge that was at the root of critical philosophy: the idea of a “ruthless” unveiling of illusions.² That impulse toward an unending, pitiless critique existed since the young writings of Marx, but it went underground at times and must now be rejuvenated. It should remain, today, at the core of critical theory.

This part calls for the constant, ruthless, and unending unveiling of illusions to

expose how belief systems and material conditions redistribute resources in society, attuned to the fact that that very unveiling will produce new illusions that themselves need to be unmasked and exposed. It proposes an unapologetic theory of illusions and calls for an ongoing and unrelenting theoretical stance of resignification, reinterpretation, and reevaluation as a way to then push the critical discussion to its main objectives: pursuing its critical horizon and determining practically how to get there. It offers a resolution of the epistemological quagmire, allows us to get beyond it, and lets us return to praxis.

It also will retrace the history of the tension that has wracked critical theory since its inception, in order to demonstrate a way forward through a reconstructed critical praxis theory. [Chapters 1–4](#) approach the problem first from a historical perspective. They trace the conflict back to the origin of critical theory in 1937 to demonstrate the source of the problem, and then forward to its actual manifestation today. The following three chapters ([chapters 5–7](#)) will then articulate the conceptual and theoretical conflict between the various methods of critique and propose a reconstructed critical theory that goes beyond the problem.

In beginning with the historical context, the point of the analysis is not to demonstrate historical progression or a learning process in critical thought. Neither is it to suggest that there has been intellectual growth or a process of self-realization along the lines of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It by no means rehearses the Hegelian method of a learning process, like the one that Honneth deployed in his historical narration of the evolution of critical theory in *The Critique of Power*, or that Rahel Jaeggi returns to in her *Critique of Forms of Life*.³ No, critical theory has not learned or grown in the process. It has stumbled. But it is vitally important to locate where it went wrong, where it faltered, in order to push it forward and past those fault lines and avoid those pitfalls.

This is not a story of progress, a Hegelian history of philosophy, or a learning process. It is a cartography of shoals and rocky coasts to avoid. It is an effort to move past prior failures to get back to praxis—knowing full well that the process will surely produce regressions and require rethinking in the future. This is a reconstructed critical theory for these times and for our historical context: a reconstructed critical praxis theory for the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER 1

The Original Foundations

When Max Horkheimer articulated his vision for a new program of critical research in 1937 while the Frankfurt School was in exile at Columbia University, he put in motion a tension between two sensibilities that has plagued critical theory ever since: on the one hand, a commitment to reflexivity and a type of historical constructivism that was potentially postfoundational, and on the other hand, an allegiance to scientific knowledge that was deeply Marxian and bore a clear scientific tendency. The tension, inscribed in Horkheimer's formative article "Traditional and Critical Theory," led to an instability that would tilt critical theory one way or the other over the rest of the twentieth century. Frankfurt School critical theory could have gone in either direction, and had it gone in the first, it would have been far closer to poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and critical race, queer, and other late-twentieth-century theories. But in the 1930s, the members of the Frankfurt School were predominantly Marxian, and this pushed the original generation instead in a more scientific direction. Later generations would move away from Marxism, but nevertheless they replaced those epistemological and normative foundations with others—some more Kantian, others more Hegelian. If anything, the chasm between later generations of the Frankfurt School and poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and queer and other critical projects deepened as time went by and as the various critical theories confronted one another more brutally—despite the fact that most critical thinkers moved further and further away from Marx.

Horkheimer's classical articulation of critical theory in 1937 contains the seeds of today's predicament. Paradoxically, his article contains an internal contradiction: two intellectual instincts at odds with each other, two instincts melded together that, separately, would have pushed critical theory in very different directions. I say "paradoxically" because the idea that contradiction is a driving force of history was an integral part of the Marxian method and central to the form of immanent critique that the Frankfurt School drew from Hegel to deploy for its own use. It would be tempting to call this original tension in Horkheimer an inherent contradiction within critical theory that now calls for overcoming and sublation, but frankly, that would

be presumptuous hubris—and undermine the very point of this intervention. The tension was not in fact inherent or necessary. The contradiction was not inextricably linked to critical theory. It was, instead, a historical artifact of Horkheimer's situation in 1937, the historical position of Marxism at the time, and the geopolitics before, during, and following World War II. It was, in the end, a deep and historically situated tension unique to the mid-twentieth century—and one from which we need to extricate ourselves today. Let me explain.

Marxian Normative Foundations :: Max Horkheimer

The tension at the heart of Horkheimer's project for critical theory stemmed from the conflict between two intellectual tendencies laid on top of a specific normative ambition—namely, human emancipation. The first tendency was a certain type of reflexive and historical constructivism; the second, a deep commitment to Marx and an aspiration to scientific Marxism. The confrontation between the two pushed early critical theory toward a scientism that was entirely at odds with its own constructivism and antipositivism.

The backdrop, most importantly, was the normative ambition. By contrast to traditional scientists, Horkheimer explained, critical theorists do not aim simply to describe the world accurately or objectively, infer universal laws and rules that determine reality, or predict external outcomes or behavior with precision. The goal is not simply to make correct prognostications based on scientific discovery of external objective phenomena. The ambition, instead, is to emancipate humans from their self-incurred slavery—from the forms of domination inherent in early-twentieth-century capitalism. The goal, in other words, is to change the world that critical theorists study.

For Horkheimer, the world as presently ordered, “the world of capital,” is marked by oppression, war, and barbarity. It is a world without reason and is inhuman, characterized by “a new barbarism.” In the face of this reality, critical theorists pursue the goal, no different than that of human activity more generally, of achieving “a reasonable organization of society that will meet the needs of the whole community.” Or, as Horkheimer states elsewhere in the article (he repeatedly and clearly articulates the ambition of critical theory throughout), the goal is to achieve “the rational state of society”; “a future society as a community of free men”; “the right kind of society”; “an association of free men in which each has the same possibility of self-development”; “a society without injustice”; “a rationally organized future society”; “a state of affairs in which there will be no exploitation or oppression”; and “a world which satisfies the needs and powers of men.” Critical

theory has “the happiness of all individuals as its goal.” The “real function” of critical theorists is precisely to be a force within their concrete historical situation “to stimulate change.”¹

With these objectives in mind, critical theory took on two very different guises. On the one hand, Horkheimer infused critical theory with a deep reflexive and constructivist tendency: the core difference that distinguishes critical from traditional theory is that critical theorists understand themselves to be the product of the historical conditions and modes of production. They understand that they and their scientific knowledge are the products of, in Horkheimer’s words, “the mode of production practiced in particular forms of society.”² In other words, both the objects that critical theorists perceive and the very “perceiving organ” of the critical theorist are shaped by historical circumstances.³ As a result, there is no universality to the phenomena that they study. Their understanding of the world and their theories are historically situated. These will vary depending on the historical and economic context and especially depending on the modes of production in society. Reality is different in a feudal versus an industrial context. Critical theorists see differently at any historical moment and see different objects. Moreover, because of the normative ambition, critical theorists try to shape their historically situated reality in specific ways. They are not only historically situated but also, at the very same time, transforming history and themselves. The idea is not simply to interpret reality accurately but to transform it in specific ways that are inflected by the normative ambition of critical theory. Insofar as reality is entirely situated and must be understood in such a way as to push it in a particular normative direction, there is not only no universality but also no objectivity to the analysis: it is impossible to maintain a fact-value distinction. Interpretation serves the ambition of social transformation.

This forms one main distinction between critical and traditional theory. The latter is founded, by contrast, on the notion of objectivity, insofar as the objects of study are all taken to be “external to the theoretical thinking”—that is, not historically shaped by humanity, not “the product of human work.” “This alienation,” Horkheimer writes, “finds expression in philosophical terminology as the separation of value and research, knowledge and action, and other polarities.”⁴

The reflexivity of critical theory means that critical theorists must constantly measure their reality simultaneously on the basis of their own self-transformations, the changes in historical and economic conditions, and the surrounding social reforms and transformations. There is a fluidity and constant motion to critical theory. It is never static; it never remains the same. It is constantly evolving as both its objects and its horizon change. And that change is human-made: the critical attitude understands that, in contrast to biological or physical laws, any notion of necessity in critical theory is affected by human conduct. The theorist is

part of the transformation and must participate in bringing about that change. They have agency: as Horkheimer writes, this is “the idea of a state of affairs in which man’s actions no longer flow from a mechanism but from his own decision.” If there is change, it is the product of critical theorizing. This is the idea of critical theory being “a genuine force, consisting in the self-awareness of the subjects of a great historical revolution.”⁵ In this sense, critical theory does not rest on solid foundations other than its normative ambition of emancipation. The normativity is its only foundation. This is why, in part, Amy Allen charges the Frankfurt School with an unfounded faith in progress: progress, Allen argues, is its normative foundation. Insofar as Horkheimer is (in 1937 at least) still Marxist, Allen’s charge is compelling, at least with regard to the 1937 article; but after the war, Horkheimer’s relation to progress changed.

On the other hand, Horkheimer’s vision for critical theory aspired to a scientific paradigm modeled on the natural sciences. It was also Marxian. It is actually the combination of these two elements that creates the greatest tension, given that the article in fact embraces a scientific Marxism rather than the earlier, more philosophical Marx or what is often referred to as the Young Marx. The article venerates the model of the hard sciences and places critical theory in the scientific tradition. That, in itself, is remarkable and has significant effects on the texture of critical theory that Horkheimer articulates. It means that critical theory is about hypothesis testing and the formulation of scientific theories. From this perspective, it has a relation to facts and truth that is inherently foundational: critical theories can be tested to check their validity and truth value.

Horkheimer frames his article in terms of scientific theory. He begins by defining theory in the most scientific way, drawing on mathematics and physics. For Horkheimer, theory is the derivation of propositions from primary principles, in a Cartesian sense. Its validity (or rather its “real validity,” in Horkheimer’s words) “depends on the derived propositions being consonant with the actual facts.”⁶ Now, to be sure, critical theory differs from traditional theory, in Horkheimer’s view, precisely because of its contextualism and the self-reflectivity of the critical theorist. But—and this is the important point—critical theory aspires to the same scientificity as all other theory. Horkheimer emphasizes this—and it is, in fact, the reason that he frames the entire article on the paradigm of scientific theory. “The individual steps within [critical] theory are,” Horkheimer stresses, “at least in intention, as rigorous as the deductions in a specialized scientific theory.”⁷ In large part, Horkheimer does so to shield critical theory from the usual charge that, insofar as it is not objective in the usual sense of science, it is nothing more than “an aimless intellectual game, half conceptual poetry, half impotent expression of states of mind” or that it appears “to be subjective and speculative, one-sided and useless,” as well as “biased and unjust.”⁸

“As rigorous as the deductions in a specialized scientific theory”: that is a remarkable statement and ambition for critical theory that would orient the early Frankfurt School toward a particular type of scientism (specifically, toward Marx). Marxian analysis would provide the rigor and scientific backbone to Horkheimer’s article. The article is grounded on the reality of class struggle and on the necessity of proletarian revolution. It embraces a Marxian theory of history based on dialectical materialism and the driving force of internal contradictions. Horkheimer could not be clearer about this—as evidenced, for instance, in the following passage:

To put it in broad terms, the [critical theory of society] says that the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era; it generates these tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation for the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism.⁹

Horkheimer explicitly follows Marx and Engels on a number of points. First, he expressly adopts their thesis that the proletariat is best situated to perceive the contradiction between capitalist modes of production and a just society. Second, he specifically embraces the “Marxist categories of class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, pauperization, and breakdown,” as well as “commodity, value, and money.” Horkheimer implicitly follows Marx and Engels with regard to social classes, modes of production, and their philosophy of history and in believing that the objective of critical theorists forms “a dynamic unity with the oppressed class.” Or, even further, that the thinking of critical theorists must “serve” the oppressed class. And that a capitalist economy of commodity exchange “must necessarily lead to a heightening of those social tensions which in the present historical era lead in turn to wars and revolutions.”¹⁰

Horkheimer adopts all three key building blocks of Marxian thought. First, undergirding the entire project is a belief in the importance of the Marxian category of “class conflict.” Horkheimer argues that, by contrast, the natural sciences are “not directly connected with class conflicts,” which has a direct implication on their construction of facts.¹¹ Second, Horkheimer also accepts and assumes Marx’s theory of alienation. In a bourgeois society, he writes, people’s “work and its results are alienated from them.” Third, Horkheimer embraces Marx and Engels’s thesis that the proletariat are best situated to do the immanent work, from their working experiences, to achieve social transformation. In sum, critical theory, as a way of knowing, is based “on Marx’s critique of political economy,” Horkheimer declares in the “Postscript” to his article, also in 1937. This gives Horkheimer’s

thesis a real sense of historical determinism. His critical theory of society is correct, he maintains, and necessary: “the most advanced form of thought at present is the critical theory of society and every consistent intellectual movement that cares about man converges upon it by its own inner logic,” Horkheimer contends.¹²

These two tendencies in Horkheimer’s vision for critical theory clashed. The first was profoundly constructivist; the second, deeply scientific. And given the importance of the second, which infuses and realizes his normative ambition, Horkheimer’s article ends up sounding proto-positivist and, thus, foundationalist.

To reconcile this conflict, Horkheimer oriented critique in an epistemological direction, toward the critique of ideology.¹³ In the article, he argued that the proletariat, although in the best position to understand the contradictions of capitalism, could not see its own interests properly or envision the future and, thus, the critical intellectuals needed to show the proletariat the proper way. The proletariat, Horkheimer wrote, is prevented from seeing because of ideological interference: “this awareness is prevented from becoming a social force by the differentiation of social structure which is still imposed on the proletariat from above and by the opposition between personal class interests which is transcended only at very special moments.” The result is that the proletariat does not achieve “correct knowledge”: “Even to the proletariat the world superficially seems quite different than it really is.” This then imposes an obligation on the critical theorist to become “a critical, promotive factor in the development of the masses.”¹⁴

The critical theorist, in Horkheimer’s view, plays a vanguard role and “can find himself in opposition to views prevailing even among the proletariat.” Horkheimer embraces an almost Leninist ideal: “The theoretician whose business it is to hasten developments which will lead to a society without injustice can find himself in opposition to views prevailing even among the proletariat.”¹⁵ He resolves that tension by taking an epistemological route.

The result is that critical theory became twined with ideology critique. As Raymond Geuss explained in 1981 in his analysis of critical theory, “The very heart of the critical theory of society is its criticism of ideology. Their ideology is what prevents the agents in the society from correctly perceiving their true situation and real interests; if they are to free themselves from social repression, the agents must rid themselves of ideological illusion.”¹⁶ This is what allows Horkheimer to talk about individuals in capitalist regimes following their “untrue interests” and acting “as mere functions of the economic machine”; of the proletariat having its “own true interests”; or of the world as “it really is.”¹⁷ It is what allows Horkheimer to characterize fidelity and solidarity as being “elements of the right theory and practice”; to speak of critical theory as “true theory”; or, even

more, to claim that “the future of humanity depends on the existence today of the critical attitude.”¹⁸ These are proto-positivist statements, made possible by a belief in the necessity of Marxian theory but fundamentally at odds with the constructivist strand of his critical theory.

In sum, Horkheimer articulates in 1937 a critical theory that is reflexive (in the sense that critical theorists view themselves as historically situated and changing the course of history) and historically constructivist (in the sense that people are the product of their times and reality is historically constructed), but then he inflects it with a Marxian philosophy of history that makes critical theory scientific. The normativity in the theory is Marxian. Horkheimer embraced a highly scientific conception of knowledge influenced by Marx—one in which all scientific theories, traditional and critical, are the product of the social conditions and modes of production attendant to determinate historical circumstances. Thus, knowledge can be situated only within the context of what he calls “real social processes.”¹⁹

Theorists who are not critical do not understand or recognize this, Horkheimer argues. Instead, they universalize and render permanent their theories—which then become reified and a form of ideology. These traditional scientists believe that they are acting freely, when in fact they are shaped by social mechanisms.²⁰ In this sense, they are subject to “false consciousness,” in Horkheimer’s words. “The false consciousness of the bourgeois savant in the liberal era” is precisely to believe that they are free and discovering scientific truths, when in fact everything is determined by social conditions and modes of production.²¹ By contrast, critical theorists both understand that they and their object of study, society, are shaped by historical conditions, and correctly view themselves as agents of revolutionary change. This creates a tension that pushes Horkheimer toward ideology critique as a way to address and resolve the lack of a proletarian revolution. The critical task became to overcome the false consciousness of the proletariat to ensure that history progresses along the lines outlined by Marx and Engels.

It is important to realize how central Marx was to the first generation of the Frankfurt School because that is what inflected the original critical theory and created the lasting tension within critical theory. This was true even for the most interpretive critical theorists—even for someone like Walter Benjamin.

The Reach of Dialectical Materialism :: Walter Benjamin

Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History”—his final essay, written in 1940 shortly before he took his life—is situated at a great distance from Marx’s philosophy of history, as are many of his other writings.²² The essay is messianic,

perhaps; esoteric, certainly. Benjamin writes that there is no telos in history. He distances himself from Marx's view and makes plain that he does not believe in the inevitability of a revolution giving rise to communism. There and elsewhere, Benjamin resisted dialectical materialism, worried that it would lead to a form of quietism.

But if one looks more closely at Benjamin's political-intellectual engagements, he, like Horkheimer, was caught in the mesh of dialectical materialism. This is illustrated well by Benjamin's project, with Bertolt Brecht and others, to launch a new journal, *Krise und Kritik*, in 1930: the critical scaffolding was firmly embedded in a Marxian register.²³ "The journal is political," the memoranda of intent declared. "By that is meant that its critical activity is consciously anchored in the critical situation of present society—that of class struggle."²⁴

In January 1930, Benjamin and Brecht planned the launch of *Krise und Kritik*, along with the writer Bernard von Brentano and the drama critic Herbert Ihering. The critical framework was firmly Marxian. They all agreed on what was needed: scientific expertise by critical intellectuals to demonstrate the validity of the dialectical materialist method, the foundational role of class struggle, and their implications for understanding the crisis—and even perhaps contributing to it. They understood (at least Benjamin clearly did) that the economic and political crises had begun to produce or, in Benjamin's own words, "must produce manifestations of crisis in the superstructure."²⁵

Benjamin's plans for *Krise und Kritik* were starkly positivist, even foundationalist. The role of the critical intellectual, Benjamin declared in conversation with Brecht, was not to lead the proletariat but rather to fulfill "a subordinate function" of proving the validity of the dialectical materialist method—essentially, of providing scientific research to solidly establish the proper and necessary sociological positions.²⁶ The journal was intended, Benjamin maintained, to publish the scientific expertise of scholars and to engage not in journalism but in academic research and demonstration. The program that Benjamin and Brecht set was clear: "The journal's field of activity is the present crisis in all areas of ideology, and it is the task of the journal to register this crisis or bring it about, and this by means of criticism."²⁷

"Interventionist thinking" was the order of the day. "Inconsequential thought" was to be avoided. *Krise und Kritik*—which also for a short time was called *Kritische Blätter* (literally "Critical Pages" but more metaphorically "Critical Notebooks" or "Critical Papers")—was to be a journal that would permit "an active, interventionist role, with tangible consequences, as opposed to [the] usual ineffectual arbitrariness."²⁸ Benjamin clearly expressed what he had in mind for *Krise und Kritik* as follows:

The journal was planned as an organ in which experts from the bourgeois camp were to undertake to depict the crisis in science and art. This was meant to demonstrate to the bourgeois intelligentsia that the methods of dialectical materialism are dictated to it by its own most necessary characteristics—necessities of intellectual production, research, and existence. The journal was meant to contribute to the propaganda of dialectical materialism *by applying it to questions that the bourgeois intelligentsia is forced to acknowledge as those most particularly characteristic of itself.*²⁹

The project was thus deeply positivistic in a scientific, Marxian sense. Critique would lay the foundation for revolutionary political change. As Brecht wrote in the context of that projected journal, the concept of *Kritik* was “to be understood in the sense that politics is its continuation by other means.” It should not come as a surprise that Erdmut Wizisla, who published the extensive materials recording the planned publication of *Krise and Kritik*, compared, as “near equivalents,” the intended method of Benjamin and Brecht with the logical positivism of the Vienna School.³⁰

Benjamin was really taken by the project. “A new journal is at issue, and indeed the only one to have overcome my firmly rooted conviction that I could never again get involved in anything like it...and it will be called *Krise und Kritik*,” he wrote in a letter to Gershom Scholem in October 1930.³¹ It created friction with the larger orbit of the Frankfurt School. Brecht was perhaps too crude or vulgar theoretically for Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, or Friedrich Pollock and troublingly supportive of Stalin; the Institute members were perhaps too bourgeois still for Brecht; and Benjamin was a source of concern for all as he navigated between them.³² But everyone was working in the same register of class struggle, dialectical materialism, and a certain kind of scientism.

Ultimately, this positivist ambition foiled the project. Benjamin felt that the first three articles to be published were not in fact expert science. They had not lived up to the ambition of the journal and could not “claim to have been written by an expert authority.” For instance, the German translation of an article by Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov, a Russian Marxist who died in 1918, titled “Idealist and Materialist World Views,” was decades old and outdated. If it could have claimed expert authority, Benjamin wrote, that would have been twenty-five years earlier. Benjamin withdrew from the project at the end of February 1931, followed by Ihering and then by the financial collapse of the publishing house Rowohlt and the emergency press restrictions of July 1931, which finally ended the project.³³

The terms *Krise* and *Kritik* would be taken up again and again and eventually became twined—ultimately displacing the term *praxis*. For most of the following decades, they retained a Marxian connotation. Reinhart Koselleck’s book *Kritik und Krise*, published in 1959 and written explicitly for a postwar “state of

permanent crisis,” had already begun to distance itself from Marx.³⁴ Koselleck focused there instead on the way in which the Kantian conception of critique had so influenced the utopianism that would, apparently and recurrently, at least according to Koselleck, lead to terror. But throughout the 1930s and 1940s still, critical theory and the primacy of crisis and critique remained tied to dialectical materialism for the most part.

Consolidating the Foundations :: Theodor W. Adorno

Theodor Adorno’s intellectual sensibilities regarding scientific knowledge, social science, and philosophy differed sharply from Horkheimer’s. Adorno came to critical theory from a more interpretive philosophical background, steeped in Husserl, Freud, and Kierkegaard and influenced by musical composition, art, and musicology. From the outset, from his inaugural lecture delivered to the philosophy faculty at the University of Frankfurt in May 1931, titled “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Adorno questioned the very premise that human inquiry could comprehend reality. Adorno took as his point of departure a radical break in philosophy: contemporary philosophy, he argued, could no longer aspire to understand the world in its totality. The actual could not be rendered rational. The systematic and total theories of earlier German philosophy were things of the past. “Philosophy,” Adorno said, “must learn to renounce the question of totality.” The philosophical enterprise itself was an interpretive exercise, by contrast to science. Adorno could not have been clearer. “Plainly put: the idea of science (*Wissenschaft*) is research; that of philosophy is interpretation.” Accordingly, Adorno cut critical philosophy down to size: rather than aim to render society rational, he proposed searching for middle-level concepts and interpretations that could solve punctual problems—conceptual tools that lay somewhere between the minute analyses of the Vienna Circle and of positivism and the comprehensive, totalizing analyses of German idealism. These concepts, he argued, could serve as interpretive keys to resolve social problems and thereby trigger the demand for change. The task of critical philosophy, Adorno proposed, was to discover and construct those interpretive keys.³⁵

Despite the different sensibilities, Adorno shared with Horkheimer an attachment to Marxian theory. The only two examples of promising concepts that Adorno offered were the Marxian categories of commodity structure and class analysis. These interpretive keys, in his view, led directly to praxis—in an unmediated way. Referring specifically to the praxis imperative in Marx, Adorno explained:

When Marx reproached the philosophers, saying that they had only variously interpreted the world, and contraposed to them that the point was to change it, then the sentence receives its legitimacy not only out of political praxis, but also out of philosophic theory. Only in the annihilation of the question is the authenticity of philosophic interpretation first successfully proven, and mere thought by itself cannot accomplish this [authenticity]: therefore the annihilation of the question compels praxis.³⁶

The tension between interpretive philosophy and Marxian theory would push Adorno to focus his theoretical research on the negative moment of the Hegelian dialectic, leading to the publication in 1966 of *Negative Dialectics*. Before that, however, in conversation with and under the influence of his intellectual collaborations with Horkheimer, Adorno found himself pulled even deeper into the same tension reflected in Horkheimer's writings—one that was accentuated by the historical circumstances of the war.

On the one hand, the reality of fascism and the Holocaust pushed Adorno to an even more negative position about the potential of critical philosophy. The historical circumstances had a marked effect on Horkheimer as well, who became far less sanguine about the prospect of a proletarian revolution. Indeed, Horkheimer became less confident about the prospect or even the very possibility of progress.

In their notes appended to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* completed during the war in May 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno took a dark view of history, at odds with the prospect of a communist horizon. Even as they foresaw the demise of fascism, they did not predict a progressive future but rather more of the same, if not worse. When fascism is over, they wrote, “there is nothing to prove that a spirit of freedom will spread across Europe; its nations may become just as xenophobic, pseudocollectivistic, and hostile to culture as Fascism once was when they had to fight against it. The downfall of Fascism will not necessarily lead to a movement of the avalanche.” As if that were not sober enough, Horkheimer and Adorno added: “The principle of liberal philosophy was that of ‘both/and.’ Today the principle of ‘either/or’ seems to apply, but as though a decision had already been taken for the worse.”³⁷

In these dark passages, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reinforces the earlier aspect of historical constructivism with an even larger dose of contingency. Marx's determinist philosophy of history is absent. The prospects are bleak. Critical theory, Horkheimer and Adorno would later emphasize in their new preface in April 1969, “holds that the core of truth is historical, rather than an unchanging constant to be set against the movement of history.” There are no universals, but now there are no teleologies either. In fact, two decades after they wrote the book, they already had different views of the correct interpretation of their historical

circumstances. “In not a few places,” they write in 1969, “the reality of our times is formulated in a way no longer appropriate to contemporary experience.”³⁸ Critical analysis, in this sense, has to be punctual and historical and can be valid only in its immediate, concrete historical context.

“There is nothing to prove that a spirit of freedom will spread across Europe”: One might have thought that this revisionism would have broken the grip of the Marxian conception of history and liberated those elements of constructivism embedded in Horkheimer’s earlier vision for critical theory. But surprisingly not: even Horkheimer and Adorno’s writings during World War II retained elements of scientific Marxism. On the other hand, then, and somewhat surprisingly, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also continued in the furrow of Marxian categories and logics. The discussion of Odysseus and his confrontation with the Sirens, from book 12 of the *Odyssey*, is telling. In their essay on Odysseus and the Sirens, Horkheimer and Adorno lay on top of the relationship between Odysseus and his oarsmen a dialectic modeled on the Marxian relationship between the capitalist managers and factory workers. As you recall, Odysseus’ encounter with the Sirens is a test by means of which Odysseus conquers nature and his own nature. He does so by dominating his men—through the complete dominion over his oarsmen who, with wax in their ears and strict orders to continue rowing no matter what, cannot hear him beseech them to release him from the chains that tied him to the mast. It is only through the thoroughgoing oppression of his men that Odysseus’ plan succeeds and he can overcome nature.

Horkheimer and Adorno impose a Marxian interpretation on the myth of the Sirens by equating Odysseus to a capitalist head of industry and the oarsmen to workers. They achieve this in gradual steps that retrace Marx’s philosophy of class conflict. First, they make an allusion to feudalism. Odysseus is first compared to “the seigneur who allows the others to labor for themselves.” Right after that, they introduce the next historical period and the arrival of the early bourgeoisie. Odysseus is compared to “the burghers,” who, like him, “would deny themselves happiness all the more doggedly as it drew closer to them with the growth of their own power.” Then the capitalist proprietor enters the stage. They describe Odysseus “as [the] proprietor, [who] finally renounces even participation in labor.” Finally, the stage is set for the last phase of capitalism, characterized by capitalist managers and directors of industry. They compare Odysseus to the captains of industry. They write about “rulers from the cunning Odysseus to the naïve managing directors of today.”³⁹ The historical trajectory is Marxian: from the feudal seigneur, to the burgher, to the proprietor, to the manager, to the captain of industry.

In fact, the last two stages reflect precisely the historical analysis that Horkheimer laid out in “Traditional and Critical Theory.” In that article in 1937, he

had specifically elaborated on Marxian history to develop a new, final stage in which the proprietors of capital were displaced by managers and directors. As he explained there, capitalism had evolved since the nineteenth century and since Marx's analysis, to the point where, as a result of the concentration of capital, the legal owners of capital had begun to take a back seat to the managers and directors of corporations, in fact to the point where (in 1937 at least) directors who did not even own part of the business were more powerful than the capitalists: "Owners become increasingly powerless before the directors and their staffs." This was accompanied by a rise of ideologies grounded on notions of great personalities and management skills. "The end result of the process," Horkheimer wrote in 1937, "is a society dominated no longer by independent owners but by cliques of industrial and political leaders."⁴⁰ This same progression, from proprietor to director, is reflected in their elaboration of Odysseus and the myth of the Sirens.

Horkheimer and Adorno elaborate a similar historical progression for the oarsmen. At first, they are described as mere "laborers" toiling for their seigneur. But soon, "the world of prehistory is left behind," and all of a sudden, the oarsmen are compared to the proletariat. Horkheimer and Adorno refer to their "manual labor," and then they write, in very Marxian terms: "The stopped ears which the pliable proletarians have retained ever since the time of myth have no advantage over the immobility of the master." Following that, we witness the same progression from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The oarsmen are compared to factory workers today: "The oarsmen, who cannot speak to one another, are each of them yoked in the same rhythm as the modern worker in the factory," Horkheimer and Adorno write.⁴¹

Like the recurring master-slave dialectic, Horkheimer and Adorno actualize the domination of Odysseus over his men by mapping it onto a Marxian history of the present. The myth ultimately reflects the relation between the "managing directors of today" and "the modern worker in the factory." The mode of production is coerced and alienated labor: the workers are deafened and turned into human machines that cannot even see themselves in their work. Horkheimer and Adorno write that these "men—despite their closeness to things—cannot enjoy their labor because it is performed under pressure, in desperation, with senses stopped by force. The servant remains enslaved in body and soul; the master regresses."⁴² This is, of course—and the authors draw explicitly on it—Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and its famous dialectic of the lord and bondsman. And along those lines, "the master," Odysseus, maintains his superiority and position of domination but regresses as a moral agent.

The Hegelian master-slave dialectic—perhaps the most privileged trope of Marxist critical thinkers in the 1950s and 1960s—is the heart and soul of this dialectic of enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno are explicit about this:

“Measures such as those taken on Odysseus’ ship in regard to the Sirens form presentient allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment.” Enlightenment, as mastery over our natures and emancipation from our self-incurred immaturity, entails forms of domination that are inescapable and destructive and inevitably lead to regression. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s words, this reflects “the inescapable compulsion to social domination of nature.”⁴³

Horkheimer and Adorno, then, continued to meld together radically different epistemological sensibilities. They retained a Marxian conception of class struggle and the idea of internal contradictions to capitalism that enacted a Left Hegelian dialectic, but at other times, they gave up entirely on the progress narrative in Marx. There emerged during and shortly after the war a Left Hegelian logic stripped of its optimism and sublation. “Adaptation to the power of progress involves the progress of power, and each time anew brings about those degenerations which show not unsuccessful but successful progress to be its contrary,” they wrote. “The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression.”⁴⁴ As the tragic historical circumstances took their toll on Horkheimer, as well as Adorno, they both sank into a dark dialectic. Humanity, they believed, “is sinking into a new kind of barbarism,” from which it seemed it would not recover.⁴⁵ Even the defeat of fascism would not lighten the forecast, as we saw earlier. The dialectic of enlightenment was ruthless. They faced, in their words, “the indefatigable self-destructiveness of enlightenment,” to the point where, they wrote, “enlightenment becomes wholesale deception of the masses.”⁴⁶ Horkheimer’s lectures at Columbia University from the spring of 1944, published in 1946 under the title *The Eclipse of Reason*, retained the same mixture of Marxism without a notion of progress. They too were dark, leading him to practically give up on the ambition of critical praxis.

Two Versions of the Frankfurt School

The deep tension within the first generation of the Frankfurt School—between, on the one hand, the reflexivity, constructivism, and historicism marked by negation and contingency and, on the other hand, the type of scientism typically associated with Marxism, especially scientific Marxism—produced two versions of early Frankfurt School critical theory.

The first variation is critical theory as *critique of Marxism*. Drawing on the elements of reflexivity and constructivism and highlighting Adorno’s writings in particular, this version unwinds dialectical materialism, liberates itself from the historical determinism of political economy, and weakens the necessity and

inherence of internal contradictions and the formality of the Hegelian dialectic. This first version tries *to salvage critical theory from Marxism*. It highlights the younger Marx—the Marx that Paul Ricœur, Geuss, and others grouped together with Nietzsche and Freud under the umbrella of the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” It highlights the moment of unveiling and unmasking. The effort here is to put epistemology in service of critical theory. And it allows later Frankfurt School scholars to portray the Frankfurt School and the whole tradition of critical theory as being opposed to rigid Marxism and instead as being much closer to poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and queer and critical race theories. It is what allows a philosopher such as Martin Saar to rearticulate critical theory as a “critique of power” under the rubric of “social philosophy” and argue that there is no fundamental tension with Foucault’s work; that the Frankfurt School was always sufficiently copious, flexible, and open to absorb its antifoundational critics.⁴⁷

The second version is critical theory as *corrective to Marxism*. Drawing on the more scientific elements of the first generation, this version recuperates dialectical logics to rehabilitate Marx, or at least rejuvenate a more foundational leftism—one that is true and normatively correct. The ambition here is to preserve the normative correctness of the Hegelian dialectic by means of concepts such as rationality, acceptability, and learning processes. This version tries *to salvage Marxism (or a proto-positivist leftist politics) from critical theory*. It returns to the Hegelian dialectic. It highlights and rehabilitates immanent critique. It revives the critique of ideology and the idea of false consciousness—in the belief that, if we get past ideological veils and can see our real interests, we can resuscitate Marxism or a real Left politics. The effort here is to put epistemology in service of a Marxian or new leftist orientation. It is what allows a philosopher such as Rahel Jaeggi or a critical thinker such as Steven Lukes to revive notions of ideology or false consciousness in the service of correct forms of life or true politics.⁴⁸

It is this controversial and divisive space—the epistemological refuge that critical theory sought—that would explode in the 1960s. It would push critical philosophy into its prolonged epistemological detour.

CHAPTER 2

Challenging the Frankfurt Foundations

In his 1962 monograph, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze proposed a radically different version and genealogy of critical philosophy. Deleuze turned elsewhere: not to Marx, nor back to Hegel or Kant, but instead to Nietzsche. In Deleuze's hands, Nietzsche becomes *the* critical philosopher—the founder, the inventor of, in Deleuze's words, "*la philosophie critique*."¹ Nietzsche is the one who pointed the way to the truly critical question about the value of truth—to interrogate what value truth serves in politics and philosophy, and what value values have.

"The search for new means of philosophical expression was inaugurated by Nietzsche."² Thus opens Deleuze's most demanding of philosophical texts, *Difference and Repetition*, published shortly before May 1968. If his book with Félix Guattari four years later would be called *The Anti-Oedipus*, then his towering work from 1968 could have been called *The Anti-Dialectic*. And Nietzsche, in his capacity as antidialectician, would serve as Deleuze's loadstar. In the new age of philosophy, Deleuze writes, "difference and repetition have come to supplant identity and negation, identity and contradiction."³ Critical philosophy, for Deleuze, is unique and uncompromising, totally at odds with Kant, but also with Hegel. "There is no possible compromise between Hegel and Nietzsche," Deleuze writes. "The philosophy of Nietzsche forms an absolute anti-dialectic, and sets out to denounce all the mystifications that find refuge in the dialectic."⁴ Naturally, Deleuze was aiming directly at Marx as well.

Deleuze turns to Nietzsche as an antidote to Hegel, to the Hegelian dialectic, to the concepts of necessity and overcoming, and to the notion of truth underlying the dialectic. He deploys Nietzsche to question the motivation for truth: to interrogate the will to truth and ask what animates the claim to truth in the dialectical method, in the notion of internal versus external values, in the idea of necessary contradictions and transformations of values. Deleuze displaces Kant as the source of critique, but he retains and relocates that critical impulse to expose the work that truth and illusions do. He draws on Nietzsche to propose what he calls real critique: not just to identify the criteria to distinguish truth from falsity, but to

document the work that the concept of truth does.

In the period 1967–1973, Michel Foucault also drew on and confronted Nietzsche’s writings to develop a genealogical method for his critical philosophy and a theory of knowledge-power. As Daniel Defert recounts, Foucault turned to Nietzsche in 1967 to distance himself from Marx, as he had done in the early 1950s to free himself from Marxism and the French Communist Party.⁵ In the process, Foucault developed a theory of knowledge that directly confronts Marxian notions of ideology and the early writings of the Frankfurt School. He proposed a radical critique of knowledge that aimed to unmask the idea that it was ever possible to sever knowledge from relations of power and, accordingly, to reach a solid normative foundation, even through ideology critique.

Foucault’s theory of knowledge-power presents the most direct challenge to the epistemological and normative foundations of a Marxian philosophy of history or of Horkheimer’s critique of ideology. Knowledge and normativity can never be severed from relations of power in Foucault’s view and, therefore, there is no escape from reflexivity and historical constructivism by way of Marx. As if he were writing directly against Horkheimer, Foucault declares in his 1973 Rio lectures on “Truth and Juridical Form”:

This great myth needs to be dispelled. It is this myth which Nietzsche began to demolish by showing that, behind all knowledge, behind all attainment of knowledge, what is involved is a struggle for power. Political power is not absent from knowledge, it is woven together with it.⁶

That great Western myth, Foucault declares, had to be, in his words, “*liquidé*”—liquidated, a far more forceful expression than *dispelled*, as in the official English translation. Foucault’s intervention is a searing critique of the possibility of achieving the kind of powerless knowledge that would be necessary in order to know what the workers’ “own true interests” are, or what political reality looks like as “it really is.”⁷ Foucault explicitly contests the Frankfurt School’s concept of ideology.⁸ Foucault’s critical philosophy directly challenges the idea of an epistemological foundation, calling instead for a constant reexamination of how power circulates through society, always questioning the categories through which critics can even analyze relations of power, and always reexamining the ways in which power and subjectivity are transformed.

Foucault, Deleuze, and others in the 1960s confronted the epistemological and normative foundations of early critical theory—it would be important to add Pierre Klossowski, Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman, and other critical philosophers as well.⁹ These confrontations challenged critical theory on the terrain of epistemology and pushed critical philosophy down an epistemological path—a

path that Nietzsche had forged with his own radical interventions on the value of truth. “What, then, is truth?” you will recall Nietzsche asking, and answering: “a sum of human relations that have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, translated, and embellished, and that after long use strike a people as fixed, canonical, and binding: truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions.”¹⁰ Other brilliant critical theorists, such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler, and others, would up the ante in the following decades with more pointed postcolonial and queer challenges to the universalism, Eurocentrism, and protoscience not only of traditional and critical philosophy, but of those very challenges to early critical theory as well.

In subsequent work, beginning at the turn of the 1980s, Foucault would open another front against epistemological foundationalism. Having freed himself at that point of Marx and debates over Marxism, and having in the process left Nietzsche behind as well, Foucault traced the origins of critical philosophy further back: first, to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the pastoral arts of governing—and conversely, the critical attitude of not being governed in those ways—and then, much earlier, to the fifth century bce and the birth of the philosophical puzzles of truth-telling and *parrhesia*. Those origins would lead Foucault to write a history of truth-making and also push his final version of critical philosophy further down an epistemological path—focused not on the criteria of truth, but instead on the orthogonal question of the production and power of truth: on how truth is manufactured and what authority and weight truth-telling has in politics and society.¹¹

There is a telling passage from one of Foucault’s intellectual mentors, Georges Dumézil, to which Foucault returned at formative moments of his intellectual life. It is a passage from the 1943 volume of Dumézil’s series on *Roman Myths*, titled *Servius and Fortuna: An Essay on the Social Function of Praise and Blame and on the Indo-European Elements of the Roman Census*.¹² Foucault invokes it on at least two pivotal occasions: first, in the February 3, 1971, session of his first lecture series at the Collège de France, his *Lectures on the Will to Know*;¹³ and again nearly ten years later, as the epigraph to his 1981 lecture series at the Catholic University of Louvain, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*—two formative bookends, almost, to his history of truth and truth-telling. The passage reads:

Looking back into the deepest reaches of our species’ behavior, “truthful speech” [*la parole vraie*] has been a force few could resist. From the earliest moments, truth was one of man’s most formidable verbal weapons, most prolific sources of power, and most solid institutional foundations.¹⁴

The power of truth: Foucault had promised a book with that title in an enigmatic footnote in 1976 and did not deliver specifically on that promise, but he did dedicate most of the years between 1971 and 1984 to precisely that: a historical analysis of truth-making, of truth-telling, and of how truth functions, what it achieves.¹⁵ This would represent a deeply antifoundational challenge to earlier forms of critical philosophy, which pushed against the question of truth versus falsity, in order to interrogate instead the operation itself of dividing truth from falsity—the function of the critical judgment that divides truth from falsity and becomes a basis for governing others. This alternative genealogy of critical philosophy, once again, pushed squarely into the terrain of epistemology.¹⁶

In the sections that follow, I will trace these various challenges to the Frankfurt School foundations, beginning in this chapter with Deleuze and Foucault, followed by Said, Spivak, and Butler, before turning, in the next chapter, to Foucault's alternative genealogy of critical philosophy from his lectures at the Collège de France (1970–1984). But before I do so, let me present, in as sharp a contrast possible, the confrontation represented by Foucault's challenge to earlier critical theory.

The Confrontation with Marx

The confrontation comes alive in Foucault's critique of Marx at the conclusion of his 1973 Rio lectures, "Truth and Juridical Forms." There, Foucault discusses the theory of alienated labor—the claim, which he attributes to Marx, that workers feel alienated in the capitalist mode of production given that "man's concrete essence is labor."¹⁷ Foucault does not provide a pin cite, but we could point to the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, where Marx defines what is quintessentially human (as opposed to animal) as precisely laboring freely and productively—a thesis that was itself the product of a denaturalizing move.¹⁸

Foucault critiques Marx's thesis—specifically the claim that man's essence is labor—arguing first that this is by no means true. "Labor is absolutely not man's concrete essence." Second, he proposes that people come to believe in its truth only by means of certain practices that are intimately connected to capitalist relations of production themselves. These are the practices, Foucault argues, that shape the body and render bodies docile. He refers to them in his Rio lectures as "infrapower": "a set of political techniques, techniques of power...by which people's bodies and their time would become labor power and labor time so as to be effectively used and thereby transformed into [surplus value]"; a "web of microscopic, capillary political power...at the level of man's very existence ..."; "the