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From Dialectic to Critical Theory; Study of Hegel & Marx to Adorno & Horkheimer

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ABSTRACT

Critical Theory evolves from Hegel's dialectics, searching for the consequences of modernity, and progresses through Marx and Lukács to the Frankfurt School. The paper briefly discusses the development of Socrates' dialogue to Hegel's dialectic method evolving through works of Marx culminating into the critical theory of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno as a mechanism of critical thought and resolution to modernity.

Keywords: *Critical Theory, dialectic, whole, particular, evolution, spirit, materialism, social, marxism, dialogue, consensus, contradiction*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of time, critical theorists have worked to set their objectives, approaches, ideas, and modes of explanation apart from those of the social and natural sciences. Instead, they contend that the opposing poles of philosophy and the social sciences—explanation and understanding, structure and agency, regularity and normativity—should be combined rather than kept apart by social research.

While the Frankfurt School, which includes Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas, is frequently thought of as the sole source of "critical theory," any philosophical school with goals that are similarly practical could be referred to as a "critical theory," including feminism, critical race theory, and some types of post-colonial criticism. They aim for "human emancipation" amid conditions of dominance and oppression, not just to supply the means to some separate objective, as Horkheimer did.

The second time in thirty years that Europe was decimated by war in the early 1940s provided an excellent chance to explore the roots of critical theory. Hitler and fascism were unstoppable. Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, two exiled German philosophers, published "Dialectics of Enlightenment" in 1944. Why? Adorno and Horkheimer questioned if mankind was growing towards a new type of barbarism rather than attaining a completely human state. With all of our scientific advancement, secularism, and emphasis on human rights, how has the Enlightenment

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gone so wrong, and why have we just recently emerged from decades of horrific murder and war?³ Man's use of reason was intended to be the cure to myth, religion, unjust authority, and phenomena that mankind followed blindly. However, reason itself has a dark side of enlightenment Adorno and Horkheimer, however, contend that "myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to mythology." Enlightenment and mythology both seek to naturalise the universal law—to subjugate the individual in accordance with an unchanging law of instrumental reason. The same reasoning underlies all forms of transaction, including magic and sacrifice, as well as agreements with nature and the gods to keep man alive.

Critical theorists are disappointed with modernity and affluence. We reach a point where we go back, science becomes a myth, technology becomes a myth, instead of science allowing us to critically examine we start seeing it as something which is given to us. According to every member of the Frankfurt School's Critical Theorists, each person inhabits a society where highly concentrated capital rules. The critique is more adaptable than traditional Marxism. Critical theorists contend that the culture sector encourages long workdays. Going to sleep is much simpler than reflecting on one's positions and engaging in internal reflection after a long day.

The "first generation" of critical theorists spent much of their time re-qualifying Hegel's dialectics on a functional and conceptual level. Hegelian dialectic may take concepts into account in terms of how they travel through time and change, as well as how they interact and relate to one another.

Critical theory, in the words of Habermas, is a dialectical synthesis of empirical-analytic and historical hermeneutic disciplines. It's a never-ending cycle of self-awareness and vigilant criticism, and the process never comes to an end.⁴ This conviction is the product of a Critical Theory tradition that starts with Hegel's dialectic of modernity's consequences and continues through Marx and Lukács to the Frankfurt School, whose writings are considered to be the precursors of what we now refer to as cultural criticism or cultural studies.

II. WHAT IS DIALECTICS? (HEGEL TO MARX)

A dialogue was a technique or a process in the early stages of the formation of philosophy, according to Socrates. During modern times, due to complex developments in various fields, multiple disciplines emerged and consequently, various methods are evolved. Dialectic, as developed by Kant, Hegel and Marx, is one of the most significant methods in modern times. A dialogue is a process of discussion, debate, and mutual idea augmentation between two people.

³ M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, 1989

⁴ R.P Singh, 'Derrida-Habermas Debate on Europe and the Global South: A Philosophical Reflection', p.40

A approach that depends heavily on contacts with other ideas emerges via discourse. It simply contrasts with a monologue, which can only express a doctrine. Here, the aggregate of the involvement moments becomes focused on a certain theme. The interchange of ideas between two or more thinkers through argumentation with the goal of discovering the truth stimulates thinking since the pursuit of the truth gives material for thought.

Thus, consensus and conflict are two distinguishing elements of Socrates' conversations. These are the two key words in the conversation technique as they relate to the potential and growth of ideas. A dogma is nothing more than total agreement. We can get nowhere with blatant contradiction. Only in situations where there is some degree of agreement are some contradictions entertained and thought processes are sparked.

A sophisticated application of logic is used in discussion to appear to disprove the opponents' incorrect or unfounded claims. And this is the interpretation of dialectic that Kant gives. Similar to how there is a movement of thinking via critique in Socrates' conversations with Theaetetus, dialectic, for Kant, is the critical movement of mind or the self-criticism of reason itself. Dialectic uses the reason as both the subject and the object of the criticism, whereas dialogue uses the speakers as the subject and the object of the statement.

The very nature of reason itself is dialectical. Due to one or the other contradiction arising, the dialogue eventually ends with the participants in a state of perplexity. Kant analyses such issues in dialectic that human reason is unable to understand or reject. Reason is unable to convey those problems as realities, thus it cannot understand them. These problems cannot be avoided by reason since they are inherent in the very essence of reason.

Hegel deserves praise for recognising the importance of identity in every instance of conflict. Hegel's attempt to include logic into his dialectic is a startlingly novel understanding of it. It needs two lines of reasoning: the first, demonstrating the necessity of a certain category, and the second, demonstrating how this category leads to a conflicting depiction of reality. In reality, Hegel combines them. This has a certain amount of resemblance to the characteristic features of Socrates' dialogue. Just as, for Socrates, it is only consensus and contradiction that keep a dialogue in continuity; similarly, Hegel uses the phrases sublation and contradiction to describe the dialectic process. Thus, there are several similarities between Hegel's dialectic and Socrates' dialogue.

Hegel's dialectic defines "Sublation" as bringing what is fragmented into the whole or resolving into a greater unity. In the Science of Logic, categories are deduced from one another to prove that all lower categories are sublated into the higher ones and have a direct relationship to the

totality. Hegel's criticism of Kant's concept of reason consists in the fact that while recognizing its dialectical characteristics, reason fails to overcome the antinomies between finite and infinite, etc. Hegel, however, regards reason as the indispensable corrective to the deficiencies of understanding. Reason sublates the finite and its negative in the process of bringing the opposites together, revealing them as parts of a larger encompassing totality. Hegel refers to this unity in which the contradictions are sublated as the "Absolute" or the "Truth." Hegel claims

The true is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute, it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end, is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature.⁵

The *Phenomenology of Spirit*, however, does not adequately furnish the whole dialectical process through which the knowledge of the Absolute, the Truth, is possible. Its foundations are given in the *Science of Logic* with an exhaustive formulation on the notion of contradiction. Hegel proclaims:

“Everything is inherently contradictory. and in the sense that this law in contrast to others expresses rather the truth and the essential nature of things ... contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality; it is only insofar as something has a contradiction within it that it moves, has an urge and activity.”⁶

Recall that for Socrates, the process of debate leads to the removal of contradictions, but for Hegel, contradiction is inherent to each word. Hegel's dialectics operates on the tenet that the *negation* of the *negation* exists. Because of this, every term—be it a notion or a reality—evolved. Near the end of the *Logic*, Hegel draws the conclusion that there is nothing, either in reality or in conception. It is as straightforward and abstract as people typically imagine:

“Nothing exists as just brutally given and simply possessing one or two fully positive characteristics. Nothing exists that is just first and primary and on which other things depend without mutual relation... what appears at first simple and immediate is actually complex and mediated.”⁷

Hegel, thus, rules out the possibility of the elimination of contradiction once and for all. And with it, Hegel's dialectic deviates from Socrates' dialogue. And this is how Hegel incorporates *Logic* into dialectic. Kant distinguishes between logic and dialectic because he holds the conventional view that the removal of contradictions causes human cognition to steadily

⁵ Hegel, 1975. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p.11.

⁶ Hegel, 1969. *Science of Logic*, tr. A.V. Miller, Book Two, London, p.439.

⁷ Kolb, David, *The Critique of Pure Modernity- Hegel, Heidegger and After*, P. 46

advance. Hegel is fundamentally opposed to this view. He applies his dialectic in the Science of Logic to the gradual explanation and development of not only the 'separation' but also of the 'connectedness' between one category and another. Hegel develops the "System of Subjective Logic," the third part of the Science of Logic, through the process of deducing categories from one another. In this passage, Hegel develops the idea of the subject, which is the same as the theory of the notion, according to which the concepts of Being and Essence are combined to form a single entity. The notion of Hegel's dialectic—that *there is unity and the struggle of opposites*—is made clear when we reach the stage with Notion when subjectivity is the real form of objectivity.

The Notion depicts an objective totality in which each distinct instant appears to be the 'self-differentiation' of the governing universal. That is to say, every specific moment must be viewed as a whole since it includes the entire as its very substance. Let's revisit the Phenomenology of Spirit, where the truth is the entire, for clarification. But the entirety is nothing more than the essence manifesting via its growth. This represents Hegel's principle of dialectics that *quantitative changes lead to qualitative changes and vice-versa*. The Notion is the general form of being in which being realises its essence via growth through contradiction and sublation. Notion expresses the free topic that accurately captures the genuine being at the same time. The free-subject moves from more basic to more advanced levels of self-realization. The Geist is what Hegel refers to as the pinnacle of this self-realization. The 'free subject', or Notion, is the Geist in its ultimate form. The object, being, is its otherness and negation.

The ontological notions of Hegel's absolute idealism perpetually outweigh the Notion and its otherness. Thus, Hegel's Science of Logic concludes with the category of being, where it started. The notions used in the study that opened the Logic, however, are no longer applicable to this because it is a new kind of being. Because being now is recognised in its Notion, or as a concrete whole, in which all specific forms exist as the fundamental differences and connections of a single overarching principle—the Absolute Truth—being now is understood.

Recall that Hegel's logic and his dialectic conclude where they started, just as Socrates' discussion inevitably comes to a conclusion with the participants in the same condition of confusion owing to inconsistencies. Evidently, the reason for this resemblance is that both the conversation and the dialectic are propelled forward by the same energy, which is what makes them both possible.

One of the most significant developments in this field - from dialogue to dialectic - takes place with the emergence of dialectical materialism. Marx and Engels entered the philosophical arena

when materialism, in its various forms those of Descartes, Locke, Kant and Feuerbach - had developed to the extent that there was no need to reformulate philosophical materialism. What was lacking in all kinds of materialism including that of Feuerbach was dialectic. At this point, Marx and Engels recognized the significance of Hegel's dialectic. As expounded by Hegel, however, the laws of dialectic were of the nature

of a mystery, as Engels explains it, in as much as Hegel was an idealist and his formulation of dialectic was confined within the general framework of idealism. Marx and Engels created Hegel's dialectic on the basis of philosophical materialism by taking the rational core out of it, or as Lenin put it, "picked out the pearl of dialectic from the dung heap of absolute idealism." In the *Capital*, Marx declares enigmatically:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian. but its direct opposite. To Hegel ... the process of thinking which, under the name of 'the Idea' he even transforms into an independent subject is the demiurgos (creator) of the world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea'. Wuh me. On the contrary, the 'ideal' is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind. and translated into forms of thought.⁸

Thus, for Marx and Engels, the ultimate source and sustenance of the laws of dialectic lies in the *philosophical materialism* and not in *idealism* of spirit. Marx's dialectic, as for Hegel, is motivated by the contradictory character of reality. But different from Hegel, the ultimate basis of the contradiction, for Marx, is philosophical materialism, and, on this foundation, the achievement of dialectic is imposed. Marx and Engels were engaged to formulate their position on Hegel's dialectic with the aim to interpret it materialistically. Hence the dialectic of Kant and Hegel - derived from Socrates' dialogue and developed within idealism - is incorporated and interpreted materialistically by Marx, Engels and Lenin.

Marx considered Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and its final outcome - the dialectic of negativity - as one - sided and limited in many ways. Marx strongly criticised the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* entitled as "Absolute Knowledge" in which we come across Hegel's speculative dialectic. What is central to Marx's criticism of Hegel's speculative theology is Marx's own conception of man as a social and historical being, whereas, for Hegel, "The self-abstracted entity, fixed for itself, is man as abstract egoism raised in its pure abstraction to the level of thought."⁹ Just as 'man' is conceived and interpreted by Hegel in terms of 'consciousness' of 'self consciousness', similarly, all the laws of dialectic are formulated by

⁸ Marks, K. *Capital*, Vol. I, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., P. 20

⁹ Marks, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844*. P-142

Hegel abstractly. Marx's answer to the question of the nature of man represents his doctrine of dialectical and historical materialism. This is what was lacking in all earlier philosophies in general and Hegel's philosophy in particular. In his attempt to transform Hegel's dialectic, Marx reached the first full formulation of dialectical and historical materialism during 1844-45.¹⁰

III. CRITICAL THEORY; DEVIATION FROM MARXISM

Marx emphasised that it was essential to view the evolution of reason through history as a conflict of socioeconomic classes rather than Hegel's conclusion that reason had ultimately come to terms with Reality via the emergence of the modern national state, which in his perspective was the Prussian state. The proletariat would have gained political and economic power during the last phase of this conflict. Critical thinkers, in turn, disapproved of both Hegel's philosophical framework and the eschatological elements included into Marx's theory. Instead, assessments of Critical Theory that were focused on comprehending society indicated the need for developing open systems of analysis built around an ingrained kind of social critique. Their starting point was the Marxian theory of the relationship between a production system and a belief system. Critical thinkers analysed ideology in its own right and as a non-economically reducible mode of manifestation of human rationality. Marx claimed that ideology was completely explicable through the underlying system of production.

The goal of critical theory, as initially developed in the writings of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, is to both provide an explanation of the state of late capitalist society and to give a philosophically self-aware reflection on the nature of social theory. Frankfurt Marxism is concerned with the social production of consciousness, particularly with the new and increasingly varied kinds of intellectual control that have become crucial to the stability of managed capitalism in this century.¹¹

The Frankfurt School theorists soon understood that a dialectical approach could only be chosen if it could be used to itself; in other words, if they embraced a self-correcting a dialectical method that would allow them to rectify earlier faulty dialectical interpretations. Indeed, Frankfurt School theorists did not believe that the class conflicts and material tensions that Marx described had the same revolutionary potential in modern Western societies, which was an observation that suggested that Marx's interpretations and predictions of dialectic were either incomplete or inaccurate.

¹⁰ R.P Singh, *From Dialogue to Dialectic: Socrates, Kant, Hegel And Marx*, P. 272

¹¹ For a classic analysis of the mass media as a mechanism of social control see the essay by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment As Mass Deception" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp.120-167.

Horkheimer's ambivalence towards Hegel is comparable to his own work, which exhibits greater ambiguity as his career develops. However, in his later writings, Horkheimer seems to yearn for precisely that type of redemption on the level of the entire, despite his rejection of the Hegelian Absolute as an abstract resolution of the concrete negativity and particularity inherent in the universe. Horkheimer consistently emphasises the importance and agency of the concrete individual as the only site for the actualization of truth throughout his writings, yet he nonetheless clings to Lukács's idea of "totality" as both a normative and a critical ideal.

This both/and, or ambivalence, is not necessarily a self-contradiction, but rather an admission of a true paradox - and an expressive evidence to Horkheimer's debt to Hegel, who toiled under the same problem. Horkheimer may ultimately have more objections to the uniqueness of Hegel's Absolute than to its completeness. Perhaps the inclusion of it disturbs him more than the alleged absence of tangible hostility. This also means that Horkheimer's idea of a differentiated, multifaceted, non-teleological "totality" seeks to rectify Hegel's concept of the Absolute since it has a problematically spiritual or subject nature, as would be expected from a materialist thinker.¹²

Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, which serves as his philosophical magnum opus, includes a detailed analysis of the methodology he used for his previous socio-cultural studies and how it relates to the critical theory movement. According to Adorno, "this largely abstract text... seeks to explain the author's concrete procedure"; the author then goes on to fulfil this duty by engaging in an astonishingly comprehensive philosophico-political debate.¹³ *Negative Dialectics* serves as a late closing account of the nature and status of the Frankfurt project for the student of critical theory, and by returning to the issue of what makes historical materialism unique from other forms of social theory, it also illustrates the importance of methodological thinking in this particular Marxist tradition.

According to Horkheimer, a critical theory is only useful if it satisfies the three requirements of being simultaneously explanatory, practical, and normative. In other words, it must describe what is wrong with the social reality as it currently exists, name the individuals who can alter it, and offer both clear standards for criticism and doable, realistic objectives for social change. The notion of social emancipation, the apparent diseases of society, and the criticism of modernities and capitalist society were all put out by Horkheimer. Marxist philosophy is specifically interpreted by critical theory, which also reinterprets some of its core economic and

¹² Nina Belmonte, 'Evolving negativity, from Hegel to Derrida', P 31

¹³ Adorno, T.W., *Negative Dialectics*, p.19.

political ideas, including commodification, reification, fetishization, and criticism of mass culture.

The Frankfurt theorists saw materialism as an effort to restore the idealism purpose of Hegel to the advancement of social theory. And without this "return" to philosophy, it is impossible to get over the positivist division between truth and value, which, according to these theorists, has warped social theory up until the present. According to Adorno:

“It was Marx who drew the line between historical materialism and the popular metaphysical kind. He thus involved the former in the problematics of philosophy, leaving popular materialism to cut its dogmatic capers this side of philosophy. Since then, materialism is no longer a counter-position one may resolve to take; it is the critique of Idealism in its entirety, and of the reality for which Idealism opts by distorting it.”¹⁴

Critical theory is essentially an effort to describe the interaction between idealism and materialism. Under the influence of the latter, the theory is concerned to show that these notions cannot be effectively achieved within the capitalist structure of society. Recognising the impact of the former, the theory concentrates on the concepts of freedom and rationality. As Horkheimer phrased it, the outcome is a theory that is unable to be neutral because it is "a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life."¹⁵ It is important to note that these "reasonable conditions of life" are not determined by reference to a transcendent set of normative standards, but rather are the outcome, in Marx's words, of "the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age."¹⁶

In other words, critical theory investigates the conflict between reality and our perception of reality and, in doing so, generates a criticism that is inescapably embedded in the society it examines.

In brief, the theory is a way for everyone to become more aware of themselves since it highlights the different tensions and contradictions that are a part of the social life process in which we are all inescapably involved.

IV. CONCLUSION

Hegel's dialectical method involving contradiction and sublimation as operative terms develops from Socrates' dialogue. Its three principles of dialectics are accepted by marxists but when it comes to the metaphysics basis of it and the idea of dialectic being based on spirit becomes

¹⁴ Negative Dialectics, p.197.

¹⁵ 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in Critical Theory: Selected Essays, p.199.

¹⁶ Marx to Ruge, September, 1843 in Marx: Early Writings, p.209.

problematic as it cannot be justified. Also the final stage being one of capitalism is not accepted by marxists. Whereas, for critical theorists, finality is not accepted at all. For them the contradiction must go on in order to have the progression. And thus dialectics is also not based on material as marxist dialectic asserts. Thus the chain of ideas in the dialectic method has become theory loaded and elevated coming over to the critical

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