On the Status of Critical Theory

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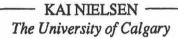*The University of Calgary*

ABSTRACT: Critical theory, while remaining in part a scientific social theory, is not just a scientific theory. The nature and distinctiveness of its criticalness is depicted. The logical status of a rationally reconstructed Habermasian critical theory is displayed, defended from some traditional criticisms (including charges of historical idealism), and contrasted with both historical versions of critical theory and purely scientific theories. Whether the critical theory articulated and defended is Habermasian, or a more historicized critical theory, in either case it is argued that it provides a sound basis for *ideologiekritik* against postmodernist scepticism.

Keywords: reflection, rationality, interests, enlightenment, emancipation, ideology, ideologiekritik, historicist, legitimation, domination

Part One

Raymond Geuss stresses in his *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (1981) that while critical theory has a systematic empirical side it is distinct from scientific theories.[1] It aims to give us knowledge of society: its structure and its dynamics and its life-world. But the knowledge it yields does not fit easily within the accepted categories of knowledge. It is not strictly an empirical theory as is a natural science like chemistry, physics, and biology. And it is not a strictly and exclusively empirical social science like Max Weber's or Talcott Parson's descriptive-explanatory-interpretive theories either. But while critical theory is something distinct from science, it is not a philosophical theory, though it does have a conceptual side. It is not a metaphysical theory, a speculative world-view, a philosophy of life (*lebensphilosophie*) or either a systematic or unsystematic moral theory. It is rather a radically new kind of theory with, or so the claim goes, a distinct epistemological status. It is a theory which does not aim to just predict, describe, or explain and interpret but it aims importantly to aid in our enlightenment. It does this — and this is where the critique of ideology is so important — by enabling us to determine what our true interests are. This is a central endeav-

our of critical theory. It also aims at being *emancipatory*. By this I mean it aims at freeing us from a kind of coercion, and the frustrations and suffering resulting therefrom, which is at least partly self-imposed.

If we limit our characterization to the above, it makes critical theory sound like a moralizing recommendatory theory. But critical theory lays claim to making, and in a systematic way, knowledge claims as well. It lays claim to a body of systematic knowledge. Part of this knowledge — and indeed a central part — is what critical theorists call *reflective knowledge*. This is a form of knowledge that scientific theories, constructed on a natural science model, cannot, or so it is plausible to believe, handle or even acknowledge. What is distinctive about critical theory is that it is a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge (supposing there can be such a thing) inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation.

Part Two

There is much that is both interesting and puzzling here and indeed puzzling in a way that is productive of scepticism. There is also the not unnatural suspicion that what is intellectually sustainable here could after all be accommodated by a theory operating with the strictly logico-empirical assumptions of what the Frankfurt school, using the term broadly, calls positivism.[2] Put differently and expanded a bit, why can't a standard descriptive-explanatory-interpretive social science with the addition of some standard analytic moral philosophy, say, work of the type done by Mill, Kant, Sidgwick, or, to go contemporary, Rawls or Gauthier, do the trick? Why do we have to — or do we have to — bring in the distinctive but problematical or at least for us unfamiliar conceptions and procedures of critical theory? I think, and will try to go some of the way towards showing, that understandable as this suspicion and scepticism are, they are mistaken and there is something unique, important, and sound in critical theory.

Geuss is sensitive to these considerations — these, if you will, standard analytical worries — and throughout his book he in effect carries out a debate between positivism and critical theory, repeatedly showing how far positivism can go to accommodate the requirements of critical theory. He finally concludes that there remain ways in which positivism cannot accommodate the aims of critical theories. To realize them we need a theory of that distinctive type. But he also claims, correctly I believe, that these aims do not lead to commitments which are metaphysical slush or are in any way incoherent or pointless.

Part Three

The detailed argument for this comes in Geuss's last chapter and I shall now turn my attention to that. Critical theory differs from scientific theory along three important dimensions. Geuss specifies them thus:

> First, they differ in their aim or goal, and hence in the way agents can use or apply them. Scientific theories have as their aim or goal successful

manipulation of the external world; they have "instrumental use." If correct, they enable the agents who have mastered them to cope effectively with the environment and thus pursue their chosen ends successfully. Critical theories aim at emancipation and enlightenment, at making agents aware of hidden coercion, thereby freeing them from that coercion and putting them in a position to determine where their true interests lie.

Second, critical and scientific theories differ in their "logical" or "cognitive" structure. Scientific theories are "objectivizing." That means that at least in typical cases one can distinguish clearly between the theory and the "objects" to which the theory refers; the theory isn't itself part of the object-domain it describes. Newton's theory isn't itself a particle in motion. Critical theories, on the other hand, are claimed to be "reflective," or "self-referential": a critical theory is itself always a part of the object-domain which it describes; critical theories are always in part about themselves.

Finally, critical and scientific theories differ in the kind of evidence which would be relevant for determining whether or not they are cognitively acceptable, that is, they admit of and require different kinds of confirmation. Scientific theories require empirical confirmation through observation and experiment: critical theories are cognitively acceptable only if they survive a more complicated process of evaluation, the central part of which is a demonstration that they are "reflectively acceptable." (1981, pp. 55–56).

Geuss aims to explicate and critically examine such a theory with such aims and dimensions for its soundness. What, rather more exactly, is its cognitive structure and distinctive mode of confirmation? Do we really have a viable set of conceptions yielding a viable and distinctive theory? It will be the upshot of Geuss's argument, as we shall see, to show that, while there are problems with critical theory, they are not insurmountable. Critical theory, properly understood, yields at least a plausible and perhaps a sound case for a distinctive kind of emancipatory theory.

People — ordinary folks as well as theorists — will have a cluster of loosely interconnected beliefs about their society, including beliefs about its structure, institutions, and the present state of society (p. 56). These include, and centrally, reflective beliefs about their own role in this. We need to be aware and take theoretical cognizance of the fact that the individuals in the society, including, of course, its theorists, have reflective beliefs about themselves. Critical social theory, indeed Habermas would claim any viable social theory, is "continuous with the 'naive' beliefs agents have about their society" (p. 56). We must not fail to note that any social theory is at least in part a set of beliefs some agent has about society, so it, too, can be described as a way in which the society "reflects on itself" (p. 56). In doing this it can be done well or badly. It is not difficult in extreme cases to recognize cases of either. But to provide general criteria for this sorting out is another thing again. Critical theory both tries to develop the theory and at the same time carry out the second-order task of giving criteria for showing how a critical theory should proceed. Geuss concerns

himself very extensively with the latter.

A full-scale social theory will not just investigate social institutions and practices but it will also investigate the beliefs people have about their society. Since the theorists themselves are such people — they certainly are not Martians — and their own theories are such theories, a theory, if it is to give anything like "an exhaustive account of the beliefs agents in the society have," will be a theory which gives "an account of itself as one such belief" (p. 56). In that, to speak pedantically, a "full-scale social theory ... will form part of its own object-domain" (p. 56). In this way, unlike scientific theories of the usual sort, it will have "*a reflective cognitive structure*" since it gives an account of its own context of origin and context of application. Marxism is a paradigm case of such a critical social theory since it seeks to explain how it was possible for Marxism to arise when and where it did. But here critical theory is not just predicting, or indeed perhaps not predicting at all, that a certain theory will arise, come to flourish, and finally end at a certain time. Rather the claim is that it is a *requirement of rationality* that it arise, flourish, and end at a certain time. Critical theory "does not predict that the agents in the society will adopt and use the theory to understand themselves and transform their society ..." (p. 57). Instead, critical theory asserts that agents *ought* to adopt and act on the critical theory where the "ought" in question is the "ought" of rationality. That is to say, or so the claim goes, critical theory is not *moralizing* moral agents and telling them that, morally speaking, they should do such and such. Rather, critical theory is saying this is what rationality requires. All the critical theorists speak in very strong and substantive terms, or at least substantive-sounding terms, about reason and rationality. Geuss, for example, attributes to Habermas the view that "it is a *mandate of reason* itself that rational agents not gratuitously destroy the necessary conditions for the development and exercise of their own rationality" (p. 69).

Here is a place where critical theory is plainly challengeable. Do we have a coherent conception of such a substantive rationality? What criteria do we have so we can correctly assert what rationality does and does not require or mandate? The scientific theories that critical theory contrasts itself with work with a purely instrumentalist conception of rationality, or so at least it appears. (That is what most people who give an account of it say.) To be rational, on such an account, is to take the most efficient means to whatever ends (aims) we may happen to have. What we desire, aim at, and what ends we have cannot properly be said to be either rational or irrational. They are simply, and necessarily so, non-rational. Where rationality comes in is over choosing the means to satisfying the desires we just happen to have, the aims and ends that just turn out to be ours. If we choose the most efficient and effective means to the satisfaction of our desires, the gaining of our ends and the achieving of our goals, we are being rational, and if we take very inefficient or ineffective means we are being irrational. And if, like most of us, we are somewhere in between, we are more or less rational. Rationality, unlike truth, admits of degrees. Such an instrumental rationality cannot properly speak of a mandate of reason. It cannot say that ratio-

nality requires such and such *full stop*. It can say no more than if you want such
and such then it is rational (most effective, most efficient) to do such and such.
Whether it is rational *sans phrase* to adopt such and such technology or utilize a
certain theory is something a scientific theory can never say. All ascriptions of
the rationality of actions are conditional on certain aims being adopted. Science,
say, economic theory, can never say whether aims are or are not rational.
Rationality always, on scientific theories, has to do with means, never with ends.

Like the Greeks, critical theorists of the Frankfurt school assert a *rationality
of ends*. But do we have a coherent conception here or is this but a confused
residue of a pre-modern metaphysical tradition? The later work of Habermas
deals extensively with this. *Perhaps* there is, after all, no rationality of ends, but
rather a complicated procedural-communicative rationality (Habermas,
1981/1987). We need to see how Habermas spells out rationality in terms of the
ideal speech situation. This is something that needs to be worked out carefully
and (I believe) sceptically. The question that remains central is — or so it seems
to me — has Habermas successfully resolved problems about rationality in
some stronger sense than instrumental rationality? It looks at least as if the bur-
den of proof here is with critical theory. But we should not either forget or over-
play the deep counter-intuitiveness of instrumental rationality. The key and
boldly interesting claim of critical theory is that it "doesn't merely give infor-
mation about how it would be rational for agents to act if they had certain inter-
ests; *it claims to inform them about what interests it is rational for them to
have*" (Geuss, 1981, p. 58). If it can make this claim persuasive, something of
very considerable import will have been achieved. The key question is, Do we
have anything even approximating objective criteria here for rationality?

Part Four

Let us return to a consideration of the twin aims of critical theory — namely,
enlightenment and emancipation. Critical theory sees itself as an intellectual
tool or an intellectual device in the long process of achieving *enlightenment* and
emancipation. These are the essential aims of critical theory without which
there would be no critical theory.

When Habermas speaks of emancipation and enlightenment, he is talking
about "a social transition from an initial state to a final state" which has the fol-
lowing properties:

(a) The initial state is one both of false consciousness and error, and of
"unfree existence."

(b) In the initial state false consciousness and unfree existence are inher-
ently connected so that agents can be liberated from one only if they
are also at the same time freed from the other.

(c) The "unfree existence" from which the agents in the initial state suf-
fer is a form of self-imposed coercion; their false consciousness is a
kind of self-delusion.

(d) The coercion from which the agents suffer in the initial state is one

whose "power" or "objectivity" derives only from the fact that the
agents do not realize that it is self-imposed.

(e) The final state is one in which the agents are free of false conscious-
ness — they have been enlightened — and free of self-imposed coer-
cion — they have been emancipated. (Geuss, 1981, p. 58)

What is this state of bondage and delusion from which the agents are to be
freed? Complex societies have well-developed institutional mechanisms for
reaching decisions about collective action. This includes what Max Weber
called bureaucratic-legal rational authority. Where the societies are stable,
people usually accept these decisions and take them, rather unreflectively, to be
legitimate. They have in that society at least *de facto* legitimacy.

Geuss remarks that to "say that the members of the society take a basic social
institution to be 'legitimate' is to say that they take it to 'follow' from a system
of norms they all accept ..." (p. 59). They believe this normative system to be
legitimate because they themselves accept — regard themselves as being bound
by — a cluster of general beliefs (normative and otherwise) which are organized
into a world-picture which they assume to be pervasively held in their society.
The social institutions, however, could in fact be very repressive and still be
acceptable in this way: the frustration of desire for members of that society is
taken to be legitimate because such frustration squares with norms accepted by
them which are deeply embedded in their world-picture. The society — more
specifically, its set of institutions and related social practices — could be deeply
repressive and these deeply embedded norms, or at least some of them, might
not be in the genuine interests of the people who accept them. But, even so, the
people in question do not see that. In such a circumstance, they are ideologically
duped and suffer from false consciousness. They suffer from false conscious-
ness because they do not know what their true interests are and they willingly
accept, when there actually is no necessity for them to accept, institutions and
practices which work against their interests. These institutions are coercive in
ways that are not in accordance with their interests. Where the coercion is very
powerful and very pervasive, the very structure of communication in the society
is so distorted that the world-picture in the society never emerges on the social
agenda for free discussion and critical inspection. It hardly gets any discussion
at all. It is immunized from criticism and comes to be viewed as inevitable and
natural. Here the false consciousness of agents (typical agents) of that society is
so deep that we can speak of the consciousness being an imposed consciousness
and the society in question being an unfree repressive society. Herbert Marcuse
(1968a, 1968b) pictured late capitalist societies as being such societies and
Habermas (1970, pp. 81–122), though with less fanfare and less dramatically,
follows him here.

Critical theory sees people in such societies being in the following bind.
"They can't be freed from their coercive social institutions as long as they retain
the ideological world-picture which legitimizes them nor can they get rid of
their ideological world-picture as long as their basic coercive social institutions
render it immune to free discussion and criticism" (Geuss, 1981, p. 60). This is

in part the basis for the famous Frankfurt school pessimism. Is there a reasonable way around this bind?

Critical theory stresses in a way that classical Marxism did not how the unfree existence which is our lot is self-imposed. Social institutions, unlike mountains or rivers or the climate, are not natural phenomena which exist by themselves. By participating in these institutions, by accepting them without protest, by acting in some sense voluntarily according to the norms of their world-picture, the agents in effect impose these coercive institutions on themselves. They simply without protest reproduce coercive social relations. Such agents have deeply deluded themselves. They have accepted, without even seeing it as such, a distorted world-picture which holds them captive ideologically. Geuss asks, "Once the agents are in this situation, how can they ever get out of it? How can a transition from this initial state of self-reinforcing bondage and delusion to a final state of enlightenment and emancipation ever take place?" (p. 6).

The usual answer is that agents are enlightened and emancipated by a critical theory. This, understandably enough, has come in for a not inconsiderable amount of Marxist irony and derision (see Gottlieb, 1979, pp. 434–440; Therborn, 1977, pp. 83–139). It is, it is not infrequently remarked, bad utopianism to attribute such powers to theories and to the achieving of enlightenment. Critical theory, by itself, will not change the world. I think, as Geuss in effect argues and I shall argue at the end of this essay, that this criticism is at best only in part fair (see Geuss, 1981, pp. 73–75).

However, let us for the nonce carry on with Geuss's account of critical theory. Critical theory, the claim goes, induces self-reflection. This self-reflective theory will enable us to come to see how deeply distorted our conception of ourselves and our social world is. Since the coercion from which we suffer is one whose power stems *only* from the fact that it is self-imposed, once critical theory induces informed self-reflection and we realize what our actual state is we will be emancipated. Marx was very critical of what he took to be such idealism in the Young Hegelians.[3] Should not the same criticism be directed at critical theory? Again, is not the bottom line of critical theory the claim "knowledge of the truth shall make you free"? Is that not a very dubious proposition and for reasons, among others, that Marx brought forth in criticizing the Young Hegelians? It is indeed a dubious proposition but, as we shall see, it is not a position that critical theory takes, though it sometimes says things that suggest it (see Geuss, 1981, pp. 73–75).

Part Five

We should continue to follow Geuss's characterization of critical theory. We should do this — or so I believe — because the theoretical claims of critical theory remain important, though possibly incomplete, even if it is subject to the criticisms mentioned above and even if critical theory is not as emancipatory as it believes itself to be. Geuss asks, "What is this 'self-reflection'?" What does it do? How does it work?

Critical theory claims to liberate people from false consciousness and one of the main ways it claims to do so is to make them aware of some unconscious determinants of their consciousness. But giving them such an awareness is surely not sufficient to show, or even reasonably to persuade them, that they are suffering from ideological delusion. Suppose Hans comes to discover that what made him a socialist was his reaction to his father who was very authoritarian and who rigidly held to conservative politics. He comes to see that that is how he, Hans, came to have his political commitments, but if he can also see that quite independently of that he has good reasons for having those commitments he will, and rightly, not think he suffers from false consciousness. Suppose, to now use an example with a similar force from personal life, Sven knows very well and cares for both Marie and Julie and suppose he eventually marries Marie and not Julie. Suppose Sven and Marie live a happy life in which they both flourish. Suppose years later, and in the condition just described, in some way or another either by self-reflection or perhaps because of his sister's probing, the unconscious becomes conscious and Sven comes to see that the principal reason he married Marie rather than Julie was that Marie was very much like his mother to whom he was devoted. That bit of making the unconscious conscious will come as a shock. It will, no doubt, jar Sven a bit, but surely it would not show that Sven suffered from false consciousness if the characteristics he prized in both his mother and Marie were genuinely there in Marie and they are characteristics he has good reason to prize and that he genuinely cares for Marie. He would have discovered a curious fact about his personal history but he would have no good reason to think in acting the way he did that he was acting under false consciousness. It is not the case that agents either generally think or should think their beliefs are false if they discover they have been determined by factors of which they were unaware.

How then can ideology-critique work on the model of gaining a reflective understanding? Geuss, in attempting to give an account of that, specifies what it is for a belief to be reflectively unacceptable to a group of people in a society. A belief would be reflectively unacceptable if people "would give it up, were they to reflect on it in the light of information about the conditions under which they could have acquired it" (1981, p. 62). Ideology-critique shows that the world-picture they have is held in false consciousness by showing that it is reflectively unacceptable. And that is done by showing that "they could have acquired it only under conditions of coercion" (p. 62).

We need to ask, in turn, how is this done? The following picture should make that clear. Human beings, being the kind of animals they are, do not merely have and acquire beliefs; they also have ways of criticizing and evaluating their own beliefs. They form second-order beliefs about their beliefs. Agents have what Geuss rather portentously calls a set of epistemic principles: some kind of at least rudimentary second-order beliefs about such things as what kind of beliefs are acceptable or unacceptable and how beliefs are shown to be acceptable or unacceptable (1981, p. 61). These typically will be shared rather broadly in the society. They are, that is, standardly shared principles within a

society or cluster of societies. And they will include views about what are good and bad conditions for forming wants, acquiring interests, and forming or acquiring beliefs of various sorts. Persons in the society will come to think, given these epistemic principles, that beliefs or interests or wants formed under certain conditions are very bad. Beliefs so formed are deemed to be *ipso facto* unacceptable. Suppose one of the epistemic principles the society comes to have — an epistemic principle which they deem to be very important for evaluating those beliefs which are to serve as sources of legitimation in their society — is the following: "legitimizing beliefs are acceptable only if they could have been acquired by agents in a free and uncoerced discussion in which all members of the society take part" (Geuss, 1981, p. 62). If agents have this kind of normative epistemology, ideology-critique can operate. Without something like that, it is very unclear what ideology-critique would come to. (But where is the explanation of the *necessity* or even the *likelihood* that they will come to adopt that normative epistemology?) The world-picture of a people, Geuss maintains, is the source of legitimation in the society in which it is the pervasively held picture. But if it is a world-picture that would not be found acceptable in free discussion, then it is the case that if people in the society still continue to hold that world-picture with its distinctive norms, they hold it because their coercive social institutions prevent them from subjecting it to free discussion. Beliefs so held are beliefs held in false consciousness; ideology-critique can show people, in such circumstances, that these beliefs are beliefs that could only be acquired under conditions of coercion (Geuss, 1981, p. 62).

Here a very difficult, central, and perhaps even intractable philosophical problem raises its ugly head.

> It is obvious that the notion of a set of epistemic principles must bear a lot of weight in this argument. But how do we pick out epistemic principles — after all, they may be held merely tacitly — and how do we know when we have described them correctly? Is there always just one well-defined set of epistemic principles to each well-defined human social group? (This seems unlikely.) How would we know? Will the epistemic principles used by agents vary from human group to human group, and from epoch to epoch? Or are there some invariant or universal features all such sets of epistemic principles share? Are sets of epistemic principles just historical givens which it makes no sense even to try to compare or evaluate, or is there some standard by reference to which we might be able to conclude that one is "better" than another? For that matter, can just *any* collection of principles for evaluating and accepting or rejecting beliefs count as a set of *epistemic* principles? By what right is a principle for evaluating legitimizing beliefs in the society an epistemic principle? (Geuss, 1981, p. 62)

Some sorting out and plausible response to these considerations is vital for both ideology-critique in particular and critical theory more generally, for "critical theory shows that a form of consciousness or world-picture is false by showing

that it is reflectively unacceptable to the agents, given their epistemic principles" (pp. 62–63).

Part Six

There are, Geuss points out, two distinct responses coming from the Frankfurt school to this, if you will, epistemic predicament (p. 63). One articulated by Theodor Adorno is contextualist and historicist and for all the difference in idiom puts him in company with John Dewey, Richard Rorty, and even with John Rawls in his recent work. I shall return to that contextualist critical theory after discussing the other form developed by Habermas which is, at least in some important respects, non-contextualistic and universalistic. It is a view Geuss describes, I hope mistakenly, as a retreat to a *transcendentalism* generated by a fear of relativism. The problem Habermas faces and tries to resolve is this: critical theory rests on the assumption that the agents to whom the critical theory is addressed are ideologically deluded. This includes everyone in the society, including of course, the critical theorists themselves. They are not at all pictured as an elitist vanguard immunized from the taint of the life-world of their society. They all — that is, all of us — suffer from false consciousness. (Is this too strong an assumption?) To escape ideological delusion they must (we must) be brought to see that parts of their (our) form of consciousness are reflectively unacceptable (p. 64). The "argument for reflective unacceptability ... depends on an appeal to the agent's epistemic principles, but if the agent's epistemic principles are themselves just part of their traditional forms of consciousness how can we know that they are not themselves ideologically distorted" (p. 64)? We seem at least to be caught in an impossible boot-strapping operation. It looks at least like the epistemic principles are part of the problem and not part of the solution (p. 64).

Habermas, trying to escape that, says that a form of consciousness is not reflectively acceptable if it could only have been acquired under conditions of coercion (Geuss, 1981, p. 64). But people live, responds Geuss, under different conditions. Some live in societies which are much more coercive than others, for example, contrast South Africa or Korea with Sweden or Iceland. In the societies where the coercion is greater the discourse is also more distorted. If under these extreme conditions (think of being in Haiti, for example) some have radically mistaken views about themselves and their situation, including badly mistaken views "about what counts as coercion and what as freedom or autonomy, then to throw out all the parts of their form of consciousness which they could only have acquired under *what they take* to be coercion, may well result in driving them yet deeper into delusion" (p. 64).[4]

Habermas thinks he can meet criticisms of this sort by what Geuss, but not Habermas, calls "a transcendental argument to the conclusion that all agents must agree to finding reflectively unacceptable any part of their form of consciousness which could only have been acquired under conditions of coercion. He further thinks that he can show that *all* agents have a tacit commitment to

the *same* views about what conditions are coercive" (Geuss, 1981, p. 65). Geuss expounds Habermas's argument in the following way. He indicates that Habermas starts from what he takes to be the pre-conditions for the intelligible use of speech in communication. To be a normal human agent is to be a being who is at least potentially a participant in a speech community. And to be something that "*we* can recognize as a human agent means to be an agent who can participate at least potentially in our speech community" (p. 65). But to be a member, even potentially, as all normal human beings are, of our speech community, or any speech community, we must understand what it is for a statement to be true and with this ability we must also in some general way recognize the difference between true and false statements. If a statement were claimed to be true with the highest degree of warrantability we are even in principle capable of gaining for that claim, it would be a statement that all agents would agree to were they to consider everything relevant to it in absolutely free and uncoerced circumstances for an indefinite period of time. This is the ideal limit for our justified confidence (justified to the fullest extent possible) in the confirmation of our truth claims. The rational warrant for our belief increases as we approach that ideal limit. We will have an ideal speech situation in which our discourse will be undistorted and thus free from ideology when agents so discourse in a search for truth in a situation of absolutely uncoerced and unlimited discussion between completely free and equal human agents. Anyone whom we could recognize as a human agent will thereby stand committed to agreeing with us on what is to count as conditions of free and uncoerced discussion and thus basically share our views on what the conditions of freedom and conditions of coercion are.

This ideal speech situation will serve Habermas — or so Geuss claims — as a transcendental criterion of truth, freedom, and rationality. Preferences that agents would agree on in such ideal speech situations are *rational* preferences, interests that they would agree on in such ideal speech situations are true or genuine interests, and beliefs they would agree on in such circumstances are the beliefs where we have the best grounds possible for holding them to be true beliefs. Moreover, agents are free if their "situation is one which satisfies the conditions of the 'ideal speech situation'" (p. 66). In every speech act they engage in, in every action they perform, every agent must presuppose, Habermas claims, the ideal speech situation. Even if they lie, make propaganda, engage in purely strategic reasoning for some particularistic and even indefensible end, they still know, in the very act of *pretending* and *lying*, what truth is and continue to use "acceptability in the ideal speech situation as the criterion of truth" and a similar moral acceptability as a criterion for a justifiable moral norm. (After all we could only lie or pretend if we had some conception of the truth.) "This means," Geuss remarks, "that agents are committed to accepting as valid any criticism of their action which shows that action to be based on norms which would *not* be freely agreed on in the ideal speech situation" (p. 66, emphasis added).

Part Seven

Geuss, for all his considerable sympathy with Habermas, finds this transcendental turn thoroughly implausible. He remarks:

> Even if one grants that to be a human agent implies to be able to make some distinction between "true" and "false," it doesn't follow that to be a human agent one must hold Habermas' "consensus theory of truth," i.e., the view that truth consists in consensus in the ideal speech situation. I find it quite hard to burden pre-dynastic Egyptians, ninth-century French serfs and early-twentieth-century Yanomamö tribesmen with the view that they are acting correctly if their action is based on a norm on which there would be universal consensus in an ideal speech situation. The notion that social institutions should be based on the free consent of those affected is a rather recent Western invention, but one which is now widely held. The notions that an action is morally acceptable or a belief "true" if they would be the object of universal consensus under ideal conditions is an even more recent invention held perhaps by a couple of professional philosophers in Germany and the United States. (1981, pp. 66–67)

Geuss then adds:

> The point is not that pre-dynastic Egyptians couldn't formulate the "consensus theory of truth," but that we have no reason to think that they had any inclination to accept as legitimate only those social institutions on which they thought there would be universal consensus in ideal conditions. Furthermore, is it really plausible to think that we and they would agree on what counts as coercion and what as freedom? Habermas seems to be engaged in giving a transcendental deduction of a series of non-facts. (p. 67)

It is surely tempting just to agree with Geuss here. Indeed many people, though usually not so articulately, have made similar criticisms and have had similar reservations. Habermas's account seems just too unworldly, too far removed from the historical and cultural realities about the differences between people and between societies. Habermas's account (or so it is not unnatural to believe) reads more unity into humankind than it is plausible to expect.

Perhaps, then, a defensible critical theory must take a more contextualist and historicist turn. I shall turn to a consideration of that shortly, but I first want to trot out a reply that Habermas could make with some plausibility. Yes, of course, he could reply, Yanomamö Indians isolated deep in the Amazon or pre-dynastic Egyptians would not accept as legitimate only those social institutions on which there would be universal consensus in ideal conditions. They would not even think in these terms. The very terms of the discussion would be utterly foreign to them. And, something like this, though not so severe, may even be true of some folks closer to home. My point, Habermas could continue, is not about what they would actually find reflectively acceptable but about what they

would find reflectively and rationally acceptable (if that doesn't come to the same thing) when they actually become vividly and clearly aware of all the possible alternatives and had taken them to heart (reflected on them deeply). They would not, of course, actually become so aware, but the ideal speech situation is always treated as a counter-factual situation to be used to articulate what it would be rational in optimal circumstances to desire (prefer), to believe, and to claim are the true interests of human beings. It is a plain factual truth that Yanomamö Indians and pre-dynastic Egyptians are members of the same biological species as contemporary Icelanders and Montrealers. There is no reason at all to think that within the human species there is much difference, or perhaps any difference at all, in capacities for language acquisition or understanding or for that matter moral and intellectual development. The differences that emerge, as infants grow into adults, are through differential socialization and environment (including such things as diet and the like).

People as travellers — think way back to Heroditus — learn as travellers elementary Habermasian lessons, to wit, their native ethnocentrism is chastened as their awareness of alternatives sinks in. It is virtually impossible for most people in such circumstances not to become in some way suspicious or at least in some way uneasy about at least some of the things learned around the tribal campfire. Their capacity for rational understanding and rational response grows as their experience in and of life grows and (crucially here) their sense of alternatives, and what they really involve, grows. There is a growth here in human rationality — growth across the species — and it could be said, I think correctly, to correspond to what has gone on in history with the growth of the productive forces and with that growth the increasing human mastery of the world. (This last little bit *may* be too scientistic *sounding* for Habermas's taste.) The ideal speech situation, like a perfect vacuum or a frictionless plain, is an imaginative extension of what empirically can plausibly happen, a counter-factual extension used to specify what would have to obtain for us to be fully free and autonomous, for us to have through and through reasonable desires and rational preferences, for us to have a thorough grasp of the truth of a situation and for us to know what our real interests are. What is in our real interests is what we would want in a situation (a counter-factual situation, let me remind you) where there was no coercion at all and unlimited discussion of alternative putatively wantable paths by people who stood together in conditions of freedom and equality and whose only constraint on their coming to decide what they really want, everything considered, is the force of the better deliberation. Similar things can and should be said for true beliefs, rational preferences, justified norms, and being genuinely free.

The Yanomamö and the pre-dynastic Egyptians would not, of course, think in this way but they still could in the way indicated above be brought to think in this way by steps they could themselves come to recognize to be relevant. The steps to be taken here correspond to the historical development of the human species as a whole and in a way that fits with the biological capacities of the human animal.

Part Eight

I want now to turn to, and to articulate, a historicist and contextualist develop-
ment of critical theory which in effect accepts the criticism that Habermas's
turn is both transcendental and mistaken.

Geuss remarks here:

> Habermas' "contextualist" opponents are, of course, free to adopt practi-
> cally the whole of his substantive analysis, as long as they reject the tran-
> scendentalist underpinnings. To be sure, *our* real interests *are* the ones we
> would form in conditions of complete freedom of discussion, and any
> beliefs we could have acquired only under conditions of coercion we *will*
> find unacceptable, but these are just facts about us and our form of con-
> sciousness, just complex results of our particular history and traditions,
> and of no transcendental standing. (1981, p. 67)

The contextualist-historicist form of critical theory which Geuss, as we have
seen, associates with Theodor Adorno, goes something like this. It, like all criti-
cal theory, argues that a form of consciousness or a world-picture is "shown to
be false by showing that it is reflectively unacceptable to agents, given their
epistemic principles" (Geuss, 1981, p. 63). But instead, like Habermas trying to
show that there are underlying universal epistemic principles of a very general
sort at least implicitly acceptable by all peoples everywhere, everywhen, the
contextualist rejects that there are any such universal principles and takes it as
an evident factual datum that "agents' epistemic principles and their standards
of reflective acceptability just vary historically" (p. 63). We must firmly recog-
nize and take to heart that "our standards of reflective acceptability and the
social and cultural ideals in terms of which we criticize societies and ideologies
are just part of our tradition and have no absolute foundation or transcendental
warrant" (p. 63). What we must do — and here comes the contextualist and his-
toricist side — is start from where we happen to be historically and culturally,
from a particular kind of frustration or suffering experienced by human agents
in their attempt to realize some historically specific project of "the good life."
(Here such a historicized critical theory strikes a note from which Michel
Foucault should not distance himself.) The critical theories we propounded in
the course of this undertaking are "extraordinarily fragile historical entities
which, even if effective and 'true', can never lay claim to any absolute standing
— they are effective and 'true' only relative to this particular historical situation
and are bound to be superseded" (p. 63).

A critical theory should not try, this historicized account maintains, to speak
to all humanity across all time and cultural space, but to a particular group
determinately situated at a reasonably specific time. (Here this theory is like the
account in the later Rawls [e.g., Rawls, 1985].) Its task is to help members of a
specific group to gain "self-knowledge by making explicit for them the epis-
temic principles they already use (but of which they are not perhaps fully
aware) and by giving them knowledge of the implications of these epistemic

principles for the rest of their beliefs ..." (Geuss, 1981, p. 63). Critical theory — or at least that is its aim — gives them a perspicuous understanding of "what changes would result if they were to apply the standards of rationality they tacitly accept in a consistent and thorough-going way to the whole body of their beliefs" (p. 63). Critical theory doesn't take on, in this contextualistic construction, the universalistic task carved out for it by Habermas, but specifies, for particular agents at a particular time and place, "how they would have to modify their beliefs to attain their ideal of a rational, satisfying existence" (p. 63). As a self-reflective theory, it could quite happily do concerning itself what the more standard varieties of Marxism do about the theories they critique — namely, it could understand that it itself is only possible and could only be effective in a given historical period. Critical theory, too, like everything else, has its cultural and historical conditions of possibility.

There is much in this historicized account which seems to be very sensible, to not land us in relativism (if properly understood), and to be important to a non-utopian formulation of critical theory. My own rather pragmatist articulation of critical theory shares similar contextualist and historicist conceptions (Nielsen, 1982, 1983). I shall not, however, try here to adjudicate the conflict between a contextualist and a transcendentalist critical theory except to register the hunch that there may be less of a contrast between them than Geuss believes. Moreover, and connectedly, I doubt that Habermas is the transcendentalist Geuss makes him out to be.[5] What I want to turn to now is Geuss's account of how much can be accepted by both sides, as something they have in common, and to see, as well, something of its import and plausibility. This will lead us to examine parts of critical theory we have yet to characterize. So for the rest of this exercise, just bracket and set aside the dispute between contextualist and universalist critical theorists.

Part Nine

Ideologiekritik, something which is at the heart of critical theory, could proceed apace unaffected by such bracketing. That is, both contextualists and Habermasians could agree on how to proceed here. *Ideologiekritik* "has a function to perform in situations in which a repressive social practice or institution is considered legitimate by the very agents whose wants and preferences it frustrates because those agents hold some world-picture or set of normative beliefs which they could have acquired *only* under conditions of coercion" (Geuss, 1981, p. 68). In such a situation, critical theory can show these beliefs to be reflectively unacceptable and ideological to these very agents in the following way:

> These disagreements about the epistemic status and ultimate grounds of the critical theory need not directly affect the actual practice of *Ideologiekritik*. Both parties to the disagreement — both the contextualist and the transcendentalist — can agree that *Ideologiekritik* has a function to perform in situations in which a repressive social practice or institution is considered legitimate by the very agents whose wants and preferences it

frustrates because those agents hold some world-picture or set of norma-
tive beliefs which they could have acquired only under conditions of coer-
cion. In such a situation, then, a critical theory criticizes a set of beliefs or
world-picture as ideological by showing:

(a) that the agents in the society have a set of epistemic principles which
contain a provision to the effect that beliefs which are to be sources
of legitimation in the society are acceptable only if they could have
been acquired by the agents under conditions of free and uncoerced
discussion;

(b) that the only reason the agents accept a particular repressive social
institution is that they think this institution is legitimized by a set of
beliefs embedded in their world-picture;

(c) that those beliefs could have been acquired by these agents only
under conditions of coercion. (p. 68)

An "ideological form of consciousness is one which legitimizes a social practice
or institution," which *ideologiekritik* shows, in the way characterized above, has
a purely *de facto* legitimization and not a *de jure* legitimization. *Ideologiekritik*,
where successful, shows that in these circumstances there should be no yielding
to the state the *right* to rule or to the capitalist the *right* to own and control the
means of production. Only a false consciousness keeping agents from knowing
what their real interests are, what their actual condition is, and what their soci-
ety is like could make them believe this purely *de facto* legitimization is also *de
jure*. Recall that "an ideological world-picture is 'objective illusion' in the sense
that it *falsely* claims that it is the world-picture fully rational agents would find
themselves 'compelled' to adopt (by the force of the better argument) if they
were to engage in unrestricted discussion under ideal conditions" (p. 72). Good
critical theory using *ideologiekritik* can do just that: that is, show the falsity of
that world-picture in the way we have described, or at least show that its central
claims are false. The job, to amplify a bit, is to show that at crucial junctures
this world-picture contains important and inexpungible statements which have
no standing as objective knowledge, that they are statements "to which rational
agents under ideal conditions would not agree ..." (p. 73). In this situation,
agents come to see that they actually have an interest in abolishing institutions
they had previously mistakenly thought they had an interest in maintaining.
They see (a) how deeply their wants and desires are frustrated by these institu-
tions and (b) they see that there is no necessity that they be so frustrated. It is
not a price we must pay for stability, or for reasonable efficiency in distribution,
or for sufficient abundance such that there are no great scarcities.

Part Ten

At this point Geuss brings up a feature of Habermas's social theory which takes
cognizance of the Marxist charge, or vulgar Marxist charge mentioned earlier
— namely, that Habermas's account ignores the phenomena of power and suf-

fers from the weaknesses of liberal historical idealism. Geuss remarks show what a response to that charge would look like:

> Even if the agents in the society are enlightened in this way they may be less than fully emancipated. We have been assuming that the *only* reason the agents accept the repressive social institution is that it is legitimized by their ideological world-picture. When they see that that world-picture is false, they realize that the social institution is merely repressive and unacceptable, but this does not mean that the repressive social institution will immediately and automatically disappear; powerful social forces may keep the practice or institution in existence despite the fact that increasing numbers of agents realize that it is not legitimate. In fact, repressive social institutions will be kept in existence not merely by a kind of social inertia, but because they foster and promote the real and perceived interests of some particular social group; and that group will have every reason to resist the abolition of the institution. The discussion up to now has ignored one important aspect of the situation in which *Ideologiekritik* becomes necessary: It is the situation of a society split into groups with conflicting interests. (1981, p. 73)

This, of course, is exactly the situation Marxists and Marxians, including Habermas, believe we are in, namely, a society divided into antagonistic classes with different real and perceived interests.

Habermas points out, adding something to what we have noted before about ideology, that "an ideology is not a form of consciousness which merely legitimizes repression, but one which legitimizes an *unequal* distribution of normative power" (Geuss, 1981, p. 74). That is, different people, different classes, different genders have unequal power in our societies in determining what is to be done and how people are to live. Ideologies, Habermas claims, are *bound to particular interests*. It is a function of an ideology to make that unequal distribution of power seem in one way or another legitimate, everything considered, and thereby to be, the ideology gives to understand, a justified, or at least an excusable, unequal power. It is not infrequent that moral and normative political theories do just that, though they typically do it unwittingly. They sugar over with sweet moral talk the domination of one group by another. This is one of the reasons why Marxists speak of moral *ideologies*. The ideology (moral ideology or otherwise), of course, in reality serves the advantage — the interests — of some particular class or group. But it does this surreptitiously. What the ideology tries to make believable is that what is done is in the interests of the society at large. *Ideologiekritik* can help us see that this is a mystification serving the dominant powers. It will show us that we have a fragment of an ideology here. However, it is also crucial to see that becoming enlightened need not lead to an escape from domination. The reflectively unacceptable normative power will not disappear simply because people become aware that it is unacceptable. It is the historical idealist's mistake to think critical reflection will necessarily free us. Indeed, given the distribution of power in class societies and

the interest that some have in domination, it usually will not. The oppressive power may remain firmly intact and may even, for a time at least, increase. Indeed there is likely to be a need, or at least a perceived need, for even more repression when the domination is clearly, and widely, perceived as illegitimate.

> This will not necessarily be so in cases of ideological coercion. Ideological coercion is self-imposed—by acting in the way they do, agents constitute it — but the "objective power" it has over them is not *just* a power which will be automatically dissolved by critical reflection. In acting in their deluded way the agents have produced a complex of social institutions which cannot now be abolished merely by changes in the agents' beliefs — by the dawning recognition of where their true interests lie. To abolish an established social institution which is deeply rooted in the interests of some social class will in general require more than a change in the form of consciousness of the oppressed; it will require a long course of political action. Until that course of action has been brought to a successful completion, the institution will continue to exist and to exert its baleful influence on even enlightened agents, restricting their freedom and frustrating their desires. (Geuss, 1981, pp. 75–76)

However, that does not mean that critical theory is useless, much less that it has a baleful influence, stemming the tide of revolutionary activity just when that is needed. Good *ideologiekritik* can "break ... the *compulsion to believe* in the legitimacy of the repressive social institutions" (p. 75). Reflection "alone can't do away with real social oppression but it can free the agents from unconscious *complicity* in thwarting their own legitimate desires" (p. 75). Moreover, it may be the case that "delegitimization of oppression may be a necessary precondition of the political action which could bring real liberation" (p. 75).

Geuss sums up the matter thus:

> So, in cases of ideological delusion, enlightenment does not automatically bring emancipation in the sense of freedom from the external coercion exercised by social institutions; much less decrease of suffering and frustration. If anything enlightenment is likely to make awareness of frustration rise. Although enlightened agents in a repressive society may know enough to reject their basic social institutions, they may not know much more than that about where their true interests lie; they may not trust themselves to predict what interests they would form in a liberated society. So the process of enlightenment itself may be incomplete until the agents are "emancipated" not only from complicity in their own oppression, but from the unfree social existence they now lead. (Geuss, 1981, p. 75)

This clearly shows that Habermas is not a liberal historical idealist, or indeed any kind of historical idealist at all, either in disguise or in spite of himself. He does not shield himself, or us, from the awesome spectacle of power and class conflict and from thinking of what must be done in the light of that. However, it

can rightly be said that critical theory, at least as articulated by the Frankfurt School and by Habermas is radically incomplete, for, while it recognizes the need for such an account, it does not give us an account of how we can get from enlightenment about our condition — a firm understanding that and how we are oppressed — to an understanding of how the oppressive power that dominates us can be broken and how a different, more humane and just world can be brought into being and be sustained. How can the oppressed conquer political power and transform their world into what the young Marx called a truly human society? Habermas, unlike many conservatives and liberals, does not say that such conquering of political power is impossible or even unlikely. And he does not give to understand, as many liberals do, that revolution, where feasible and sustainable, is, everything considered, still undesirable. But he gives us no account of how this transformation of society is to be achieved or even any good reasons for believing that it will be achieved. He lacks, as does critical theory of the Frankfurt orientation generally, a theory of the transformation of society. For this, as far as I can see, there are still no rivals to the more standard Marxist accounts. These accounts have their acute critics (e.g., Jon Elster) but for positive accounts, accounts saying how it is possible for society to be transformed and what direction the transformation might plausibly and desirably take, they are still they only game in town.[6]

NOTES

1. Further reference to Geuss's *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (1981) will be given in the text. This compact little book is the clearest statement we have of what the structure of a critical theory would look like. Hence, since this too is my quest, I focus on it.

2. A key document here is the exchange between Adorno, Popper, Dahrendorf, Habermas, and Albert in Theodor W. Adorno et al. (1976).

3. See Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right' on the Jewish Question, The Holy Family*, and *The German Ideology*. Key selections from these works occur in David McLellan (1977, pp. 26–74 & 131–191).

4. I am not confident about how illuminating or helpful this is. It seems to me (*pace* Geuss) that if people who are so deeply deluded about their situation can cast off any of the forces — principally external forces in such situations — they can only improve their condition, though no doubt less so than optimally desirable. But all the same, the way, predictably, will be up rather than down, as Geuss believes.

5. See his various explicit remarks on this in Jürgen Habermas (1987).

6. I have tried to say something about this in Kai Nielsen (in press).

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