

The confirmation of critical theory: The role of reflectiveness

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1.

Critical theory makes knowledge claims. It says things, sometimes rather extraordinary things, which purport to be either true or false. Thus it is perfectly in place to ask under what conditions would its claims be falsified or at least infirmed and under what conditions would they be verified or at least partially confirmed. In what ways are its claims testable? (Central claims like that are very unlikely to have a *decisive* falsification or verification: a *decisive* test. But that is true of a lot of science. We typically have to do with a weaker evidential support.)

Of course, for many of the claims of critical theory there is no simple confirmation or disconfirmation as there is for “The cat is in the tree” or “The goose is in the oven”, for critical theory a complicated conceptual structure. Raymond Geuss, in his *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, sets out this structure perspicuously and in a way that makes us see how difficult the task of confirmation and disconfirmation is.

A critical theory is a very complicated conceptual object; it is addressed to a particular group of agents in a particular society and aims at being their “self-consciousness” in a process of successful, emancipation and enlightenment. A process of emancipation and enlightenment is a transition from an initial state of bondage, delusion, and frustration to a final state of freedom, knowledge, and satisfaction. A typical critical theory, then, will be composed of three main constituent parts:

- (A) A part which shows that a transition from the present state of society (the “initial state” of the process of emancipation) to some proposed final state is “*objectively*” or “theoretically” *possible*, i.e. which shows:
 - (1) that the proposed final state is inherently possible, i.e. that given the present level of development of the forces of production it is possible for society to function and reproduce

- itself in this proposed state;
- (2) that it is possible to transform the present state into the proposed final state (by means of specified institutional or other changes).
- (B) A part which shows that the transition from the present state to the proposed final state is “*practically necessary*,” i.e. that
- (1) the present state is one of reflectively unacceptable frustration, bondage, and illusion, i.e. (a) the present social arrangements cause pain, suffering, and frustration; (b) the agents in the society only accept the present arrangements and the suffering they entail because they hold a particular world-picture; (c) that world-picture is not reflectively acceptable to the agents, i.e. it is one they acquired only because they were in conditions of coercion;
 - (2) the proposed final state will be one which will lack the illusion and unnecessary coercion and frustration of the present state; the proposed final state will be one in which it will be easier for the agents to realize their true interests.
- (C) A part which asserts that the transition from the present state to the proposed final state can come about only if the agents adopt the critical theory as their “self-consciousness” and act on it.

If one thinks of this abstract scheme as filled in with a particular content, with Marxism, for instance, then the “initial state” is the present capitalist mode of production and the proposed “final state” is the classless society (p. 76).¹

Critical theory needs part (A) so as not to be a utopian fantasy. If the critical theory is a Marxism it will need an account of the transition from a class society to a classless one. However difficult it is to provide such a theory it, as Geuss points out, is, conceptually speaking, a standard bit of social science and provides no special problems of confirmation or disconfirmation. There is, of course, on the part of critical theory, no claim, as there is in Orthodox Marxism, that the transition is inevitable. It is rather a “practical necessity.” The claim is that the proletariat has an overwhelming real interest in bringing about a classless society. “From the fact,” Geuss remarks, “that the agents have an overwhelming practical interest in bringing about an objectively possible transformation whether or not it will occur depends on all kinds of other facts which the theory may not allow us to predict; in particular it depends on whether large numbers of agents find the critical theory plausible, adopt it, and act on it, effectively” (p. 77). But this only shows us that we can hardly be certain here, that we cannot make categorical predictions, but that is hardly surprising or a defect. That is just the way any scientific account is. Most predictions – perhaps all genuine predictions – are much weaker than categorical predictions. But there is no reason to think that in a weaker sense we have no idea about under what conditions a specific people to whom the theory is directed will be likely to

adopt it and effectively act on it. What, I think, should be stressed instead is that it is not prediction, weak or strong, with which critical theory is *principally* concerned. The real point of critical theory is not to predict what agents will or will not do “but to enlighten agents about how they ought rationally to act to realize their own best interests” (p. 77).

It is (B) and (C) which are distinctive features of critical theory and which pose problems of confirmation (falsification/verification). (I will, for brevity’s sake, speak from now on of problems of confirmation/disconfirmation and problems of falsification/verification simply as problems of confirmation.) If part (B) of the structure is to be acceptable it cannot contain any straightforwardly factual errors and it cannot contain any disguised pseudo-factual claims. It does plainly put forward straightforward factual claims which are open to the usual methods of confirmation. But (B) has other vital elements which are not so easily assimilatable to the standard empiricist model. In talking about what is reflectively acceptable or unacceptable to agents it talks about what they would or would not acquire under conditions of freedom. Here critical theory depends very centrally “on a theory of freedom and coercion” (p. 78). But how is that theory to be assessed: confirmed or disconfirmed? The theory, Geuss argues on behalf of critical theory, “is merely a clearer formulation of views implicit in the action and form of consciousness of the agents to whom it is addressed” (p. 78). And in terms of the confirmation of such an account – and this departs from usual scientific practice – it is “the agents themselves” who “must be the final judges of whether or not they are being coerced and whether or not they are free” (p. 78). But this needs a nuanced elucidation if it is not to be badly misleading. Geuss remarks:

To say that the agents themselves must be the *final* judges of their own freedom or coercion is, however, most decidedly *not* to say that their own immediate judgments about conditions of freedom or coercion are definitive. If that were the case, *Ideologiekritik* would be superfluous. The point of a theory of ideology is that agents are sometimes suffering from a coercion of which they are not immediately aware. The agents are the final judges of their own freedom or coercion only in that there is no appeal from their perfectly free, fully informed, and thoroughly considered judgment. (p. 78)

So in addition to a requirement of empirical adequacy critical theory requires as another adequacy condition that it “has the free assent of the agents to whom it is addressed” (p. 78). The theory, or a claim or cluster of claims of the theory, is not acceptable “unless the agents to whom it is addressed agree after thorough consideration in conditions of perfect information and full freedom to the views about freedom and coercion expressed in it.” (This, as we shall see, is a very key claim of critical theory which needs

careful elucidation.)

What are the conditions of *perfect* information and *full* freedom in which an agents' expressed assent or dissent is real, i.e. free assent or dissent (p. 78)? Geuss claims that the argument, used by Habermas to establish that it is real assent or dissent, is circular. Geuss's argument is this: "The critical theory itself, of course, contains full and clear specifications of what count as conditions of perfect information and complete freedom, but to use these specifications at *this* point would seem to involve a circularity. If I don't from the start agree that the conditions are conditions of freedom, I may be unimpressed by the fact (if it is a fact) that if I were to be in conditions C, I would *then* agree that they are conditions of freedom" (p. 79).

It seems to me that part of the task of specifying conditions of freedom would be to make some rather rudimentary conceptual elucidations concerning the use of "freedom," "coercion" and related words in the language-games in which such terms are standardly embedded. Further, we can, *without* appealing to what people reflectively accept, or – as far as I can see without involving ourselves in a circularity – make straightforwardly true or false remarks (checkable in the ordinary empirical way) about what the use and usage is here. (Empirical claims about how words are used are empirical claims about language. They are unambiguously empirical.) Someone can indeed change the use, of course, but if the change is radical enough they have simply changed the subject and are no longer talking about freedom or coercion. If, it is replied, this is a residue of the old discredited ordinary language philosophy, then it should in turn be replied that not everything was dross in ordinary language philosophy and here is a place where it has a point.²

Be that as it may, we can now specify rather more crucially the difference between scientific theories and critical theories: "Scientific theories are cognitively acceptable if they are empirically accurate and are confirmed by observation and experiment; critical theories are acceptable if they are empirically accurate *and* if their 'objects,' the agents to whom they are addressed, would freely agree to them" (p. 79). Geuss translates this into the concrete as follows:

A critical theory addressed to the proletariat is confirmed, if its description of the objective situation of the proletariat in society is confirmed by normal observational means, and if the members of the proletariat freely assent to the theory, in particular to the views about freedom and coercion expressed in the theory. For most "scientific" theories the question of whether or not the 'objects of research' would freely assent to the theory doesn't even arise; planets, genes, microscopic particles, etc. can't assent or dissent. (p. 79)

A critical theory is structurally different from a scientific theory in being

reflective rather than *objectifying*. It is not just a theory about some objects distinct from itself. It is “also a theory about social theories. ... It is a theory about how they arise, how they can be applied, and the conditions under which they are acceptable” (p. 79). It is the last consideration, plainly, which makes their confirmation distinct, or at least partially distinct, from scientific theories. But it is the case – and Geuss puts considerable stress on this – that “the central part of a critical theory is the criterion of acceptability for beliefs it presents” (p. 79).

Critical theory also differs from scientific theories in the way in which it is resolutely and irreducibly *normative*. It just doesn’t assert that the people to whom the theory is addressed would find, once freed from ideological delusion, a certain set of claims – say claims about the legitimacy of certain capitalist social arrangements – unacceptable but that critical theory asserts they would be *right* in finding them unacceptable because that picture is unacceptable (p. 79). Here critical theory is – or so it at least appears – *irreducibly normative*. It doesn’t limit itself to the making of *empirical* remarks *about* what people *believe* to be unacceptable, it makes normative remarks about what *is unacceptable itself*.

There seem to me, however, to be at least two problems here, one (if I have understood him correctly) Geuss points to and one he does not consider. Let me turn to the one he does not consider first. A critical theory appeals in testing its claims firmly to what fully informed and free individuals find acceptable or unacceptable under ideal conditions. It is finally what the subjects of their theory under ideal circumstance honestly avow to be unacceptable which determines what is really unacceptable. This is a firm part of critical theory. But critical theory also says, as we have just noted, that if the proletariat, under the guidance of critical theory, finds certain parts of the capitalist world-picture unacceptable then it is unacceptable for they are justified – right – in finding it unacceptable. That is to say, critical theory goes on to make the normative claim that the proletariat would be right in making the judgment they make. Could critical theory ever say, as my last remark seems at least to suggest, that the proletariat, or any other agents to whom critical theory is addressed, could, under these ideal conditions, ever find something to be unacceptable and that still they would be, as far as the judgment of critical theory goes, wrong? Could it ever be the case that the subjects of the theory under ideal conditions find something acceptable and critical theory contradicts them and asserts that they are wrong? If this is a possibility open to critical theory then critical theory makes a claim of normativeness or has a test for what is a true or correct norm that is *independent* of what the subjects of the theory under ideal conditions find acceptable or unacceptable. This does not, however, given its general aims, seem to be something the theory would

want to say or indeed could consistently say. If, on the other hand, we close that option, as it seems we must, then critical theory says that when we say that the proletariat or whomever (the subjects of the theory) find something to be unacceptable under ideal conditions, then it *must* be unacceptable. But, if this is so, then to add that the proletarians are *right* comes to saying something which is perfectly otiose, for all critical theorists can mean, in saying that proletarians are right, given their own account, is that the proletariat really find it unacceptable in such an ideal situation. This is so because what we are justified in claiming is unacceptable is what the subjects of our theory find unacceptable under ideal conditions. But then critical theory has no *independent* source of normativity or criticalness. Agent acceptability under ideal conditions is what finally determines normative correctness on their account. It is, that is, not the theory which tells us what is acceptable or unacceptable but the theory is ultimately anthropological or ethnological, and is, through and through, in a good Millian tradition, naturalistic. It tells us how to find out (discover) what is acceptable and unacceptable. We find out that by finding out what people under ideal conditions in consensus reflectively judge to be acceptable and unacceptable. Applying its own claims about whether so and so is not acceptable or unacceptable, critical theorists say, what is or is not acceptable, is determined by what under ideal conditions agents reflectively accept or do not accept. We are, if you will, back to Adam Smith, David Hume, J.S. Mill and Edward Westermarck. But this means, it is natural to say, the criticalness has gone out of critical theory and in reality it is a naturalistic, anthropological theory with no critical force.

It is natural to say this but, I believe, mistaken all the same. Critical theory should grasp the second horn of the dilemma. The test – rather the farther down the road test, the last test, if there is such a thing – for what is acceptable or unacceptable should be what agents – the subjects of critical theory – reflectively find acceptable or unacceptable under ideal conditions (see Nielsen, 1976).³ But along the way, critical theorists, who after all are agents too and subjects of their own theory, throw out “hypotheses,” theories, or hunches about what is, after all, acceptable or unacceptable for the other agents reflectively to consider and reject or accept or modify. That’s plain normative work. Critical theorists also, and very centrally, engage in critique of ideology. They bring in certain factual matters, reveal typically unnoted empirical possibilities, reveal false consciousness, show the logical implications of certain world-pictures and beliefs critical theorists believe (perhaps mistakenly) to be ideological and suggested alternatives, including alternative normative beliefs or principles that might have been overlooked or have remained more or less submerged and barely noted. These activities display a criticalness. That all such criticism appears

at least to be what has been called (probably misleadingly) internal criticism does not matter. We rebuild the ship at sea. We must do this for we have no clear sense of what it could even mean to step out of our web of belief. Here Quine, Davidson and Wittgenstein come together in what in effect is a good old Deweyian tradition. The final test of a critical theory is just what it says it is, namely what the agents the theory addresses itself to find under ideal conditions reflectively acceptable or unacceptable. However, along the way to so finding things, and something just built into the ideal conditions qualification, there is plenty of room for the critical theorist to make critical suggestions. He does not, and need not, and should not, set himself up as a critical theory-king. The contrast here between the critical and the anthropological is a spurious one.

I now consider the problem Geuss finds in Habermas, though, uncharacteristically, however Geuss unfortunately does not present it very clearly. Critical theory, he remarks, must “itself be acceptable by the criterion it extracts from the agent’s behavior and form of consciousness, and uses to undermine their ideological world-picture” (p. 79). It tries to provide the criterion “by which to evaluate whether or not the critical theory itself ... [is] acceptable” (p. 79). What makes it acceptable, of course, is that the agents to whom it is directed would accept it if they were deliberating about accepting it under ideal conditions. This shows, or at least seems to show, Geuss avers, that there is “no neutral way to evaluate critical theory” (p. 80). He then remarks:

If one uses the criterion of acceptability it provides, it won’t be at all surprising that the critical theory qualifies as ‘acceptable’, but to use any *other* criterion seems to build rejection of the critical theory into the test conditions. Certainly a critical theory must *at least* satisfy its own standard of acceptability, i.e. it must be true that, if the agents to whom the theory is addressed were to consider the matter in circumstances the theory defines as “conditions of perfect freedom,” they would assent to the views about freedom and coercion embodied in the theory. (p. 80)

It looks like, though I am not clear about this, that we are caught up in something that is question-begging and it is not clear to me what way there is out here, if any. Habermas’s criterion of acceptability seems to be plainly very sensible. But I do not see how one can argue for it here without begging the question. It seems to me almost an inescapable starting point and endpoint. But if someone doesn’t want to accept it, I can only think to ask them to reflect again and to see if that is not really their practice (what they do) and, if they still think not, to ask them to consider if they can come up with something they regard as better and then to explain to me why.⁴ Plainly there are burden of proof considerations here. It is not crystal clear – to put it minimally – where the burden of proof lies.

2.

I now want to work with a recognizable situation that might with a not inconsiderable plausibility be thought to provide disconfirming evidence against critical theory. It is all the more interesting in that it is the sort of situation that grows out of reflection on the bleak picture given by Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno of one-dimensional man, people, that is, in a deeply ideologically deluded and self-destructive state of life (Marcuse, 1968; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972).⁵ This is a state of life they think people are in in late capitalist societies.

Suppose ... that the agents in the society really are fully satisfied with their lives and show no behavioral signs of hidden frustration. Perhaps their social institutions are so powerful and effective they can completely prevent the members of the society from forming, even unconsciously, desires which cannot be satisfied within the present institutional framework. Is this an appropriate "initial stage" of bondage and delusion from which the agents must be emancipated? Often the situations of "ideological delusion" Marcuse describes seem to be not so much ones in which the agents have unconscious, unfulfilled desires – in which they are unhappy or frustrated – as ones in which they lead shallow or uninteresting lives, or have a low level of aspirations. If the agents sincerely report themselves to be satisfied with their lives, and if we have no behavioral evidence for hidden frustration, by what standard can we adjudge these lives "poor" or "shallow," and the agents in need of "enlightenment"? The answer is that we can extract from 'the cultural tradition' standards of what the "good life" is. (pp. 81–82)

Acceptability by the agents in ideal conditions is being appealed to here as usual. But in getting agents to reflect, particularly in such situations, on what is acceptable/unacceptable, they are being asked to come to know and dwell on a variety of things welling up out of our cultural life: things from literature, art, film, from religious and metaphysical doctrines, and the like. (Here certain religious and aesthetic experiences are crucial.) There is an appeal to the tradition in the life-world in which these agents live. Appealing to the utopian content of this tradition enhances their sense of alternatives and of the range of the affective attitudes embedded in the traditions of our social life together. (Again there are echoes of Mill.) Critical theory contains a claim to the importance, as part of human enlightenment, to the experiencing of these things. This would be a concrete, relatively specific, narratively encoded experiencing of these things. Here critical theorists could take a leaf from the communitarians and hermeneuticists. The claim is that with such enhanced experience our reflective capacities will be so enlarged and so triggered that one will come to find things, including centrally institutionally rooted things in our class societies, reflectively

unacceptable in a way one did not find them before such a ramified experiencing. One's one-dimensional existence will be seen for what it is and, with the seeing of that and taking it to heart, will become a painful and frustrating life. In a different area – an area where it has often been thought to be very unempirical and in some pejorative sense “metaphysical” – critical theory will have, if my argument above was near to the mark, carried through successfully ideology critique (though not where most philosophers look for it to occur) without departing from its standard methodology of appealing to reflective acceptability and unacceptability under ideal conditions.

It is frequently claimed that here critical theory takes an elitist turn. The argument, supporting that, would be that a society “is criticized not because of the experienced suffering it imposes on some oppressed group but because it appears to fail to satisfy the neurasthenic sensibilities of a cultural elite” (p. 82). Geuss, responds correctly, I believe, that “there is no inherent reason for this approach to be elitist. The agents in the society may be perfectly content, but, if they were released from some unperceived coercion, they might very well come to realize that their mode of existence, lacking in dignity or self-directedness, as it is, does “not provide satisfactory aesthetic experiences” (pp. 82–83). “Any agent,” he continues, “might be quite capable of realizing this and developing appropriate new desires” (pp. 82–83). So, the response goes, there is nothing elitist here. Critical theorists (and here again their claim is very like that of Mill) predict that this will happen under optimal circumstances, claim that it will be a good thing and claim further that people – ordinary people – will find it to be a good thing, i.e., the range of what they find to be reflectively acceptable/unacceptable will alter in the way critical theory envisions, given its extensive intrusion into the world. This might turn out to be false – the predictions might be mistaken – but this only shows that critical theory is not metaphysical but experientially falsifiable in exactly the way the theory requires. The Marcusian claim is that in one-dimensional societies there are many agents who “are actually content, but only because they have been prevented from developing certain desires which in the ‘normal’ course of things they would have developed, and which cannot be satisfied within the framework of the present social order” (p. 83). That seems a perfectly plausible claim to make, a claim which is neither obscurantist nor metaphysical and is open to empirical or experiential confirmation/disconfirmation in the way critical theory specifies. The empirical phenomenon is the phenomenon of reflection: the experience of reflectively considering something. As Habermas puts it, critical theory initiates a “process of self-enlightenment of socialized individuals about what they would want if they knew what they could want” (p. 83) What happens “in

all cases of ideological delusion is that the agent's form of consciousness is artificially limited..." (p. 83). That is to say, "they suffer from restrictions on what they can perceive as real possibilities for themselves" (p. 83). Their perception and understanding of themselves can sometimes be so limited, so constrained, "that they cannot even conceive of having certain desires which under normal conditions they would have developed" (p. 83).

[This] is the nightmare which haunts the Frankfurt School. It is the specter of a society where social control is so total and so effective that members can be prevented from even forming desires which cannot be easily satisfied, a society of happy slaves, genuinely content with their chains. This is a nightmare, not a realistic view of a state of society, which is at present possible. Although the total control envisaged [by Marcuse] is probably not possible, we may wish to criticize some societies *both* for frustrating some desires and for preventing others from even being formed. (pp. 83–84)

However, we do get something which approximates to some extent this total control where many people are apparently content but where, if we look closely at their lives, inspect their behavior carefully, we will see that they are suffering from hidden frustrations of which they are at best only fleetingly aware and which they tend to repress. Their repressed frustration shows itself in a kind of undifferentiated not very well articulated dissatisfaction with their lives. Critical theory, understandably enough, will experience resistance from those so deluded. The analogy here with psychoanalysis is much to be point. Part of the reality of their being ideologically deluded will be that they will be "under the influence of various kinds of social 'opiates'" which will bind them to the present society "not only by belief in its legitimacy, but also by a series of 'false' modes of gratification which would be jeopardized by emancipation" (p. 84). We need, of course to ask how do we determine what is a false mode of gratification? Do we have criteria here for this? The test, fitting with the methodology of critical theory, for such "false modes of gratification" is whether agents under ideal conditions would find them opiates and thus reflectively unacceptable or not? Geuss sums up the matter thus:

The analysis of the "ideological form of consciousness" of any actual society will, then, be quite a complicated matter, involving an account of conscious and unconscious frustration accepted because of normative beliefs, claims about the kinds of desires the agents in the society would develop (but have been prevented from developing), and descriptions of the operations of "false" modes of gratification. Use of opiates is an embellishment on the basic pattern of ideological delusion: legitimation of repression and suffering through restriction of consciousness. Nevertheless the principle of "free assent" still applies; a mode of gratification is an "opiate" only if the agents themselves would agree

under the appropriate conditions of full information and complete freedom that it is not in their interest to indulge in it. (p. 84)

3.

We shall now with respect to confirmation examine Part (C) of critical theory. Part (C) asserts “that the transition from the present state [our class societies] to the proposed final state [a classless society] can come about *only* if the agents adopt critical theory as their ‘self-consciousness’ and act on it” (p. 76). Here critical theory is very indebted to the work of Georg Lukács (p. 84).

The critical question to ask about critical theory here is whether “the adoption of the critical theory” [by the people to whom it is addressed] is strictly necessary for emancipation? It is not very likely that we can show that anything is strictly necessary for emancipation but we could perhaps show that it was very conducive to emancipation or even that emancipation was not very likely to come about without it. Geuss states the confirmation/disconfirmation conditions thus:

Suppose that the agents adopt the critical theory and act to put its recommended course of action into effect (following part (A) (2) of the critical theory). Then the proposed “final state” must eventuate; if it does not, or if the final state turns out to be inherently unstable, the critical theory is disconfirmed. If the proposed final state is reached (and is stable), the agents in this state must freely agree that they have been enlightened and emancipated, and that the critical theory gives a correct account of the process of emancipation and enlightenment. That is, they must agree that their former state was one of bondage, frustration, and delusion, as described by the critical theory and that their present state is one of increased freedom and satisfaction, and one in which they have a more correct view of their true interests. Finally they must freely acknowledge that knowledge of the critical theory and the process of reflection it initiated was the mechanism of their emancipation. If the agents refuse any part of this complex free assent – if, for instance, having experienced the “final state” they decide that they were better off back in the original state – the critical theory is disconfirmed. (pp. 85–86)

Critical theory, unlike more standard forms of Marxism, is directed to everyone to whom the theory could be addressed. That means that in our society it is not directed just to the proletariat, the lumpen-proletariat and various more or less disadvantaged strata but to the capitalist class as well. This means, given the test of reflective acceptability/unacceptability in ideal conditions, that the capitalists, including the big capitalists, would, with the full development of the theory, with intensive ideology-critique directed at

them, have to come to see and assent to the proposition “that their privileges were opiates, modes of gratification which served to mask the much more serious and pervasive forms of frustration from which they suffered” (p. 87). Is this plausible? I rather doubt it. They could, very well, readily come to see that they need not be badly off in a classless society even after they have lost their privileges and much of the life of luxury that was theirs or could have been theirs. They could come to see that the classless society would be a fairer society where more people would be able to lead a more decent and a more dignified life, and they could (given such a change) come to be free from a guilt caused by their standing in the way of that. But that they would see that (everything considered) their needs would be better satisfied and that they had, as well, escaped deep sources of frustration seems to me a rather dubious proposition. In a stable class society they can live lives of luxury where they can pursue freely a wide range of interests, do creative work, travel, develop their aesthetic sensitivities, and the like. Why call this a life of frustration where the agents in question must rely on the mystification of opiates? Isn't that itself rather ethnocentric or *parti-pris*? For *some* of the *haute bourgeoisie* it surely is a frustrating life full of opiates but for others (perhaps many others) not and there seems to be no necessity here one way or the other. I do not see that critical theorists have shown that it is in the real interests of the capitalists to side with the working class and undermine capitalism and class society. It may indeed be in the interests of some, given their specific interests, but that it is generally in the interests of the big capitalists to move to taking the side of labor seems implausible.

What I think critical theory has actually in effect shown – and this squares with the standard Marxist story – is that we are in a class divided society with sharply distinct and antagonistic class interests. It is in the real interests of the workers to make a transition from capitalism to socialism and it is in the real interests of at least the big capitalists to maintain capitalism as long as it is reasonably stable. When it becomes unstable what their interests are is unclear. In such a circumstance they may just be a doomed class. What is in their interests depends on how unstable the society is and how the society is likely to go. But what is clear is that there are real antagonistic interests between the classes. It looks like the only thing to be done is to engage in class struggle until one or another of the sides wins out. Critical theory perhaps should see itself in such a circumstance as only directed at the working class and its allies. As an activist theory involved in trying to change the world, it should not try to be all things to all people. Critical theorists should not act as if the class struggle here is not real. To take such a turn would give critical theory, in general terms, a rather Lukácsian turn. But it would be a theory, recognizing the

reality of antagonistic class interests and the importance of class conflict, which clearly is a tool for the emancipation of the working class.

4.

Geuss concludes his book by asking two central, broadly epistemological questions.

- (A) Is a critical theory a kind of knowledge, or *Wissenschaft*? (Here “*Wissenschaft*” is taken to mean a body of systematically interconnected propositions which gives reliable guidance for successful action, and which satisfy certain conditions of ‘publicity’ and intersubjectivity.)
- (B) Is a critical theory different from scientific theories in its basic epistemic structure?

Let us look at (A) first. If critical theory is a *Wissenschaft* it must be a *Wissenschaft* which has an “argumentative structure which allows those who have mastered it to give some account of how and why it ‘works’, of the relations of its parts to each other...” (p. 89). It must also show the evidence for the particular parts and, where criticism of those parts emerges, it must successfully defend them against those criticisms. And this must operate with the background of assuming and using “some intersubjectively recognized standards of argumentative cogency and evidence” (p. 89).

Critical theories both aim at emancipatory action and insist that the guides for emancipatory action meet conditions of publicity. In this respect they do not differ from scientific theories. That is there must, if the theory is to be viable, be public criteria for the success or failure of emancipatory action. The criterion of publicity, if it is to come to much, must mean more than just the saying, if the criterion is to be satisfied, that the agents would reach consensus.

That criteria are “public” must mean that they have some kind of independence of the particular theory being evaluated, that they can be formulated in a way which makes them neutral between competing views. We know what it would be like for the bridge to remain standing no matter what, if any, views we might have about how to go about constructing it. The criteria for success of emancipation don’t usually have this kind of neutrality or independence. To the extent to which the critical theory is directed toward the alleviation of experienced suffering, that experience will give us a clear negative criterion of success of emancipation, but in most cases, as we have seen, the critical theory is directed at a restriction of consciousness which causes frustration of which the agents are not fully aware. In that case the very standards of

“success” of emancipation emerge only in the course of adopting and acting on the critical theory.

The neutrality of “public standards” ought also to be a cultural neutrality or independence of a particular cultural context. Determination of whether action has or has not been successful ought to depend as little as possible on the acquisition and development of the specific habits, attitudes, and skills of a particular culture; it should require only a very “restricted” kind of experience immediately available to all human agents regardless of the particular cultural content of their form of consciousness. (pp. 89–90)

Unlike scientific theories, we do not obtain this cultural neutrality in critical theories – or at least so Geuss claims. It is his belief that the “central and characteristic statements of a critical theory do seem more helplessly embedded in a particular historical and cultural context than scientific theories are” (p. 90). There is vast cross cultural consensus concerning some simple empirical propositions but not concerning the propositions of critical theory. Claims there, say claims about freedom and coercion, are very close to the cultural environment of critical theory. They do not stand independently of that cultural environment. But, whether we have neutral standards of success or not, if we actually get successful orientation in action where there is free intersubjective agreement, we have – or so the claim goes – all the objectivity we need. If that is obtained critical theory would be a form of knowledge. But this, of course, would obtain only if, *sans* neutral standards, the free intersubjective agreement cuts across cultures. But this, of course, is the intent of critical theory. If it does not attain this, it substantially fails. (This does not mean that it must be able to attain some utterly ahistorical vantage point.)

“The requirement of ‘reflective acceptability’ is a *cognitive* requirement if the agents can freely agree on what parts of their form of consciousness are reflectively unacceptable, and if this agreement can be used as a guide to action which they can all agree is successful....” (p. 91). Both scientific theories and critical theories are forms of empirical knowledge. They both appeal to experience but critical theories rest on, not only observation, but as well and crucially on the *experience of reflection*. “Whatever differences in epistemic status or cognitive structure exist between scientific theories and critical theories are to be attributed to the role ‘reflection’ plays in the confirmation of critical theories” (p. 91).

Normative beliefs are also central to critical theory. They are in the very structure of critical theories in a way that they are not in scientific theories. Ideological beliefs and attitudes which are often normative beliefs and attitudes “aren’t reported by pointing out observed negative instances, but by inducing reflection, i.e. by making agents who hold these beliefs and attitudes aware of how they would have acquired them” (p. 91).

Attribution of beliefs and attitudes of others in complex human situations is *observationally undetermined*. “I attribute to others that set of views (a) which is compatible with all the observational evidence about their behavior and (b) which makes them most comprehensible *to me*, i.e. which makes them the least bizarre and most ‘normal’ by *my* standards of what are reasonable, comprehensible views about motives, arguments, reasons and evidence” (p. 93). After all, there is no way for me to start but by seeing things by my own lights. What other lights could I start with or for that matter finally end with, suitably, or perhaps even unsuitably, modified along the way? However, this does not mean that my lights will not normally change in interaction with others, just as their “lights” will change in interaction with me. We gain a reflective understanding here which is certainly not just a matter of brute observation. We could, if we choose, call it, as Habermas does, the “experience of reflection.” It is central to critical theory and distinguishes it from the natural sciences or at least from the usual scientific understanding of the natural sciences. It carries with it all sorts of normative beliefs and attitudes and some normative principles, which, like our grammatical rules, may be principles of which we typically only have a tacit knowledge.

We acquire these beliefs and alter them and come to reject some through a complex process of socialization. This involves conversations with others about their experiences and through what in effect are conversations with ourselves as when, as we frequently do, we mull over something.

How, then, do agents acquire normative beliefs and attitudes? Through various more or less complicated processes of socialization, through conversations with other agents about their experiences, and through the internalization of such conversations which is individual thought. So to know how agents could have acquired beliefs one would have to be able to know the outcomes of possible conversations or discussions conducted under various conditions. This means that one knows how various external factors in the agents’ situation will affect the outcome, but it also means that one knows something about their epistemic principles and their perception of their own situation, about what they take to be plausible motives for action, cogent arguments, good reasons for belief, relevant considerations, etc. One can’t, of course, observe the agents’ normative epistemology or their beliefs about what are plausible motives for action, at best one can observe their behavior, including their verbal behavior. It seems unlikely, however, that observation of behavior alone (even including observation of verbal behavior) could provide grounds for exact knowledge of what sorts of arguments the agents will find cogent or persuasive. The dismal failure of behaviorism to give a convincing account of such phenomena is not encouraging. If one wishes to find out how the agents view the world and what they are likely to find convincing in discussion, one must enter into their mode of life by interacting with them – discussing the weather with them, playing with

their children, planning joint enterprises with them, consuming the local narcotic drug with them, etc. This kind of long-term interaction is not, it is claimed, just a course of observation and experiment, and the reason for this is the particularly intimate active involvement of the “observer” in what is “observed.” (p. 92)

What rationales, motives and epistemic principles I attribute to others will reflect what I myself believe to be intelligible rationales, norms, motives, epistemic principles and the like. I have no alternative to doing this, if I would understand them at all. If I take others, as I do, to be human beings, and not some strange Martians or walking, talking machines, then I must assume they are engaging in a similar reflective process when they try to understand me. That is, they are trying to make sense of my actions as I interact with them “by attributing to me views about reasons and motives which are compatible with my behavior and which they find comprehensible” (p. 93). And they, as well, reevaluate their own views in the light of their experience with me. And I do exactly the same thing. This is part of what it is to gain reflective understanding and it is what a critical theory must come to understand, and use, if it would understand and guide human action and be able to launch a critique of ideology. It is the reflective process of interpretation and it is “an integral part of human interaction” (p. 93). Moreover, as Geuss puts it, “it is the only possible context for the confirmation of critical theory” (p. 93).

It is important to realize in gaining this reflective knowledge, and in gaining a second-order knowledge of what it comes to, that we need to recognize that the epistemic principles held by people will not in general be something that has been clearly formulated or indeed something that has even been formulated at all. This is particularly true of what he calls “normative epistemology”: views about freedom and coercion and what constitutes a good life. It typically will be merely tacit. Geuss puts it well when he remarks that “their epistemic principles aren’t just out there to be observed and described; in formulating them the critical theory is in part ‘constructing’ them. Formulating them may impose on them a determinateness they did not before possess, and may cause the agents to change their parts” (p. 94). Here, as we have seen, is a source, working purely internally, of the criticalness of critical theory. The assumption is that these principles are already tacitly theirs and that they can be brought to see it through this process of communicative interaction.

Many beliefs and attitudes when we become fully conscious of them are such that to become so conscious of them is to find them reflectively unacceptable and thus, in the way critical theory argues, to refute them. By proceeding in this way critical theory can make it the case, or crucially help make it the case, that our views are more enlightened than before and this, in fortunate circumstances, plays an important part in our emancipation. It

is doubtful if we could have emancipation without it. But the enlightenment and emancipation we gain is always a matter of degree just as our views are more or less reflective. We will never escape, nor need we escape, fallibilism: the endless but hardly Sisyphean rebuilding the ship at sea. We should, however, not forget that out of this rebuilding we sometimes get a better ship.⁶

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, page references in the present essay are to Geuss (1981). I fasten on Geuss's book for it raises, with greater clarity than anywhere else in the literature on critical theory, issues about the status and testability of critical theory.
2. That ordinary language philosophy can have a fruitful use even in Marxian theory is brilliantly exemplified in the work of G.A. Cohen (see, in particular, Cohen, 1988: xi and *passim*).
3. The essential considerations here are powerfully articulated by E.W. Hall (1949). For a wider placement of this see also his *Categorical Analysis*
4. Hall's discussion of psychological realism is important here (1964: 121–132).
5. For an important discussion of these issues see Kellner (1989).
6. For companion pieces to the present essay, see Nielsen (1990, 1991).

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