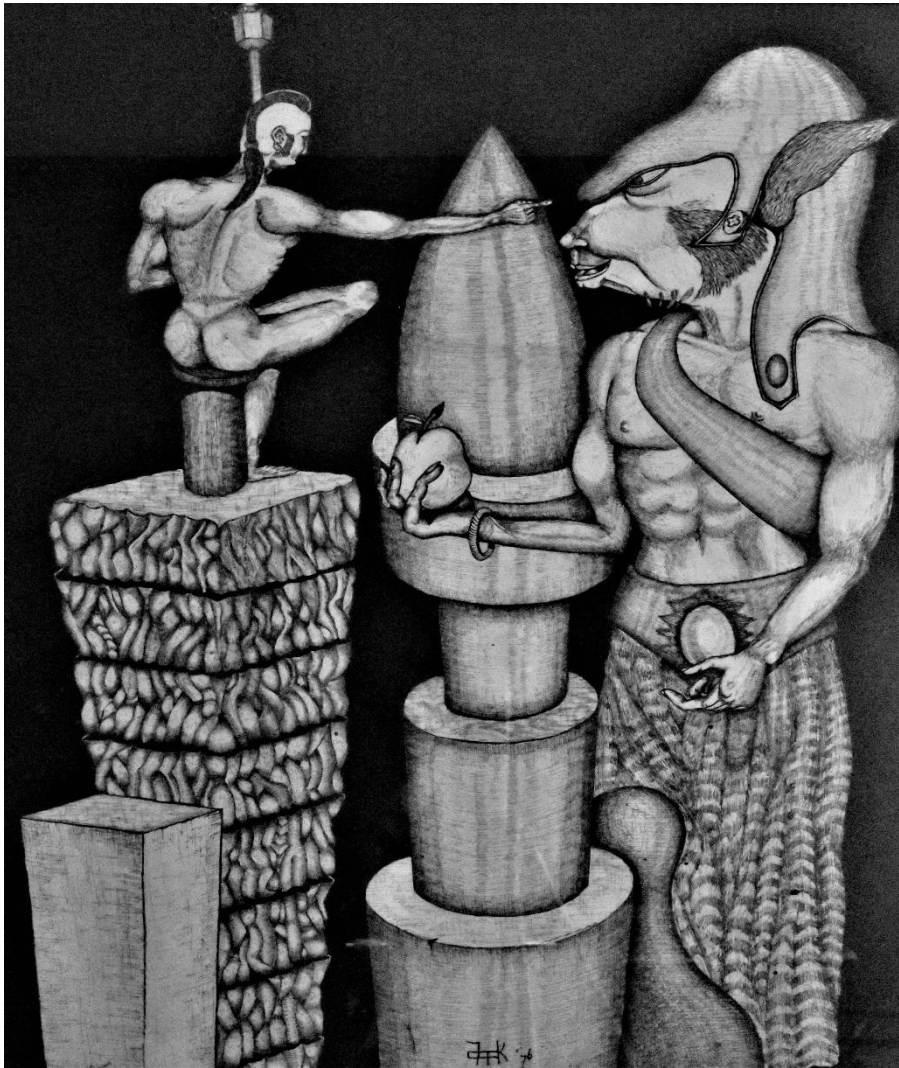


Critique, A Protean Subversive Praxis



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Foreword

What can the value of critique be in the 21st century? It is this that I found of importance to find out, given the many challenges that will increasingly face us in the 21st century. Of course, every era has its own challenges, both intellectually, socially and politically. What I think is unique for this moment in history, however, is that the scale and amount of existential catastrophic risks is unprecedented. Indeed, some even pose a threat to civilization, but also to humankind itself, which is now confronted with an extinction risk. Much of these catastrophic risks are by no small extent caused by the current socio-economic order and the Neo-liberal paradigm and mode of production. It is for this reason critique has to take upon itself the important task to question and challenge the current socio-economic order to contribute to the avoidance and mitigation of catastrophic risks. For this it is important to invent new ways of thinking, speaking, feeling and acting that might help to prevent worse case scenario's from materializing. With this, I hope, critique can serve to function as a means to both reduce and avoid suffering and the social injustice that is inherent in the current status quo. Ultimately, I hope this thesis will contribute to the debate on the meaning and value of critique.

I would like to use this foreword to also send out some acknowledgements. The first is of course due towards my supervisor, who fortunately agreed to supervise me as he also did so well during the writing of my bachelor thesis. I am also grateful for the intellectual inspiration and guidance, during my time as a bachelor-student, and now as a master-student. His views on inter-passivity and the overstraining of the Western subject greatly intrigued me, to name but two examples. I am also grateful for the amount of time and patience he has put into the supervising of the thesis, since for me it was sometimes quite a bumpy road. When writing about Byung Chul Han's *The Burnout Society*, where he argues the Western subject exploits itself to achieve as much as possible, leading to exhaustion, I could not help but to also recognize myself in that a bit as well.

My second thanks goes out to Karlijn Roex, one of my best friends and a talented critical sociologist who provided me with great intellectual and moral support. Thirdly, I would like to thank another friend, Fiona Buurkes, who was so kind to morally and practically support me by taking some daily activities out of my hands, which gave me more room to focus on reading and writing. Finally, I would like to extend my gratefulness to my parents, who always supported me in whatever I would like to do or achieve. Also their practical help proved to be invaluable, especially when big changes in my personal life occurred. I would also like to thank anyone who thought along with my subject and line of argumentation, whom I will not be able to name all here. Finally I would like to thank all people who like me refuse to give up emancipation and try to use critique as a tool to improve societies and people's lives.

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to ascertain what meaning and value critique can have in facing the challenges that are posed by the catastrophic risks of the 21st century. In the thesis, it is argued that these catastrophic risks are to a large extent caused by the current socio-economic order and the Neo-liberal mode of economy, governance and ideology. For this reason, critique has to find a way to challenge this said order. To inquire what form critique should take on for this purpose, critique's history is investigated to look for examples of how critique has had the potential to challenge the status quo. It is argued that critique is protean and always responds to crisis with the purpose to avert catastrophes. This is one of the stable factors of critique, as is its relational character, since it always forms a certain relationship towards what it is aimed at. The circumstances where this relationship is developed, however, changes over time and history. Critique, it will be shown, transforms along transformations in governance, intellectuality, socio-economic and political developments. This is what makes critique protean. In the thesis, some of these transformations and the consequences they have had for critique in regards to its meaning, function and value, will be inquired. Since such changes occurred so profoundly and radically during the Enlightenment and the responses thereto, elaborate attention is given to the form of critique that emerged from the Enlightenment, but also the critique the Enlightenment itself became subject to. Since for this thesis the value and meaning of critique will be assessed, its limits and challenges will also be looked into. Part of the research will consist in exposing the most important impediments to critique, but also what alternatives there still are and what potential for critique might still be found. The main argument of the thesis will be that critique not only can still have contemporary value, but that it is also necessary to find a critical vocabulary to help avoid or mitigate catastrophic risks.

Introduction

In this thesis we will investigate how critique has transformed over time alongside socio-political and economic developments and assess what state it is in today. In order to do so we will provide a genealogical account of critique, to see how critique has changed both its meaning and value, in terms of its content, form and practical implications. Traditionally, as we will see, critique gives itself the task of subverting modes of domination, exploitation and governance, which makes it a practice going as far back as ancient Greece where critique first manifested itself as *parrhesia*: speaking truth to power in public, with the purpose of creating a better community by means of exposing error and by developing ideas for the betterment of society and its members. As we will argue in the thesis, forming some relation to power is one of critique's stable factors, as is its aim to strive for emancipation. This does not mean, however, that critique's form, value and meaning remain the same over time. As we will show, critique morphs, mutates and transforms alongside the intellectual, socio-political and also economic developments that occur through time. We will look at what moments in (intellectual) history the most profound changes occurred, and how critique has responded to these developments. It is important to realize that critique manifests itself as a form of thinking, acting and feeling in accordance to the named developments and is always bound up with some form of knowledge and knowing. Additionally, it also holds some relation or claim to what is rational, or irrational.

Since thinking and rationality changed so profoundly during and after the Enlightenment we will specifically look at how critique has developed from modernity onwards, by tracing its development from the Enlightenment up to the critical theories that have been in part a response to the Enlightenment. As we will see, during the Enlightenment knowledge and reason came to be seen as instruments to set human beings free and install them as masters over both nature and themselves. This is something that is famously and most influentially argued by Immanuel Kant. The growth of knowledge, both Kant and other enlightened thinkers believed, is conducive to creating a freer and more rational society. Knowledge and rationality, enlightened intellectuals believed, will free us from (self-imposed) tutelage; with the help of science, human ends will be increasingly served in such a way that society will ever improve. Georg Friedrich Hegel even believed history to be a *march of reason*, arguing that the more knowledge and the collective spirit of man would grow, the freer man would be. For Hegel this was the most important function of critique.

This optimistic belief in progress came to a standstill after the cruelties of the 20th century. Enlightenment, some now believed, did not only lead to reason's progressive employment and to more freedom, but also to the use of instrumental reason and rationality as a tool of domination and destruction. One of the most important and influential critiques of the Enlightenment, where the above argument was also made, came from Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Enlightened reason, they showed, not only dialectically became a myth in itself - whilst it ironically sought to expel myths - but also carries destructive tendencies in it. Instrumental rationality, they argued, was co-opted by the economic apparatus and enlightened reason thus became tied to domination and exploitation. As a result, knowledge and instrumental reason were no longer just means for emancipation, but could be tools for making humans more unfree just the same. Although Adorno and Horkheimer criticized the Enlightenment so extensively, their purpose still was to save the enlightenment and emancipate humankind. Since Adorno and Horkheimer, and other critical theories that

followed, we also see critical theories, and critique more in general confronted with all sorts of challenges that might undermine its purpose, or value. Of course this was also already the case in Ancient Greece with *parrhesia* where speaking truth to power always posed some risk to the self, but now critique became something that is problematized in itself, as it also became an object of research. To every critique we can see some form of counter-critique emerge and usually power responds in an allergic way to critique. Part of critique's problematization is that some started to reflect and wonder on the question to what extent critique actually has potential, that is, potential to subvert power, domination and exploitation and contribute to emancipation. As some began to show, critique can significantly lose its potential, value and meaning. In this regard, some have argued critique increasingly started to wither and become exhausted.

One of critique's problems, since Adorno and Horkheimer, is cynicism. This is something I discussed in my bachelorthesis, where I argued that one of the most profound challenges to critique is the pessimistic paralysis that completely destroyed all optimistic belief in emancipation through knowledge that we saw during the Enlightenment. In my bachelorthesis I concluded (mainly in reference to Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*) that one of the reasons for the downfall of critique and its tradition is that our optimistic ideals of Enlightenment and emancipation were crushed as a result of their dialectical turn into their opposite. We have seen how Enlightenment, as a resistance against mythical thinking and prejudice, gave birth to its own myth of the autonomous and rational subject and Enlightened Reason was co-opted as a tool of domination. This is also why Adorno and Horkheimer tried to formulate a Critical Theory of their own, but also this tradition has seen its decline by not living up to its potential and leaving us pessimistically paralysed. This is partially to blame to the cynical nature of their theory in itself (as we will also see), since they argued that the masses are unthinking as result both of their successful complete assimilation in the economic apparatus and because they have become deluded in their distraction in their leisure time by the culture industry. The individual, they argue, is completely nullified in these circumstances. Critique, in other words, has not lived up to its potential, because the aims proposed by it from Kant to Adorno and Horkheimer have failed to effectuate the philosophical and socio-political change it sought for. We have not reached a realm of ends, nor have we overcome our enslavement to instrumental rationality and reason and still we are dominated and exploited by the economic apparatus. The latter according to authors like Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello has even become immune for critique, since it is increasingly successful in the co-optation of all critique, thereby utilizing it for its own purposes.

Another reason critique is deemed to be not feasible anymore, as was concluded with Peter Sloterdijk's *Eurotaoism*, is that the mobilisation and acceleration that followed in the wake of the Enlightenment with its technical and scientific developments led to a movement which has become autonomous and hence lies outside the field of our control. This was already the case with Adorno and Horkheimer, and this problem has only deepened and perpetuated itself. We only need think of the development of Artificial Intelligence that is becoming increasingly autonomous and will have profound economic, social and political consequences to find proof for this argument. Whether or not we critique processes or developments in politics, society or science does not matter, because it will not have any effect on the course of these developments whatsoever. Or so the argument goes.

Another challenge posed for critique is its intellectual history in an epistemic and normative sense. According to authors such as Amy Allen, Enlightenment and Critical Theory are Eurocentric, and tied to (post)colonialism and (post)imperialism. If critical theory is to

have any potential, it must first be deconstructed. These are only some of the problems critique is confronted with. We will look at some of those more extensively in the thesis. The goal is not to be exhaustive, complete, or exact. Rather, with the genealogy of critique we will make visible that critique indeed transforms over time and that the Enlightenment has had profound influence on the critical tradition and society more in general. We will shed light on what challenges are posed to critique, with the hope to overcome some of those challenges.

Looking at the abovementioned problems, it becomes clear that critique in all cases has some relation towards the Enlightenment, which is why the Enlightenment and some critical responses to it will be reflected on more extensively in the thesis.

This implies that whatever destructive tendencies current forms of domination and exploitation have, critique in its current form will be unable to expose or undermine this. Given the catastrophic risks that are posed by other existential risks such as climate change and techno-scientific developments such as Artificial Intelligence, finding ways to deal with these risks and preventing the worst scenario's from materializing will be necessary if we are to prevent profound suffering and social injustice.

Apart from all the changes critique underwent and the challenges it has been confronted with, it also has its stable factors, of which we saw one above. One of its other stable factors is that it always consists of a certain response and relation to crisis and catastrophe, either immanent or impeding. The goal is then usually to prevent some form of suffering, either the result of social injustice, or other catastrophes. This was also the goal of Adorno and Horkheimer, for instance, as we will see below. What changes, however, are the situations in which these catastrophes occur, or threaten to occur; its causes also differ throughout history. Likewise critique changes along. Since critique is indeed always a response to (impeding or immanent) catastrophes, we will look at what catastrophic risks we are now confronted with. We will argue that given the challenges the 21st century poses, critique is necessary to avoid social and political catastrophes, as well as to offer possibilities for developing ways of thinking and acting that help deal with existential catastrophic risks such as climate change and artificial intelligence. In other words, we will look at what the agenda of critique should be in the 21st century, and what other agendas it has to relate to, especially those stemming from current and upcoming techno-scientific, social, political and economic developments. To develop such a critique, we will first need to ascertain what forms critique has taken on recently, and what it might be morphing into during the 21st century. But before we do that, we should also attempt to ascertain what forms of power and what socio-political and economic reality it can and should respond to.

As we saw above, another stable factor is that it responds to power, or forms a certain relationship or attitude towards it: critique is a means to overcome forms of domination and always stands in a certain relationship towards power. This is why we will first need to assess what techniques of power are employed to effectuate the forms of domination and exploitation we see today. As we will see, power can lead to constraints towards what can be said and done, to which critique can offer resistance to contribute to the abolishment of such constraints. If indeed some forms of power and domination have become immune to critique, it is all the more necessary that it reinvents itself. If we are to deal with the potential catastrophes described, we will additionally have to look for alternative possibilities for alternative ways of thinking and behaving. This is why it will be necessary to find out where critique can or might manifest itself. For this reason we will try and assess where and how critique still manifests itself and look at what phenomenological and sociological tools we need in order to do so. If we are to abolish (potential) suffering and social injustice and

prevent bad future scenario's from materializing, we will have to look at what forms of moral outrage and (potential (social)) suffering we see today. Critique usually manifests itself when people experience a crisis.

This also means we have to try to ascertain what form critique has morphed into, because the traditional form of critique described above is not up for the task. This is why we will look for new forms of critique. For this purpose, we will argue with the field of meta-modernism that critique can be observed to be lurking within the cultural logics of a certain place and time. The meta-modernists show that within a cultural logic we can find a structure of feeling and affects that is expressive of how people experience socio-political reality. According to them, our cultural logic is shifting from postmodernism, to meta-modernism, that is neither modern (like the Enlightenment) nor postmodern, but expresses something new. Beneath the surface of our cultural logic we can see a need for critique, but we have yet to find a proper vocabulary for it. As we will argue, in accordance with meta-modernists, critique is extremely necessary, because a cluster of catastrophes will be approaching us in the 21st century. When we find a critical vocabulary, then maybe something might be changed about the socio-political order that is increasing the changes of impending catastrophes.

In the thesis we will see that critique is not only an intellectual, philosophical, but also social phenomenon. To summarize: throughout the thesis we will argue that although critique does not exist in a stable form regarding its meaning and value, there is nonetheless a constant, stable factor in it, namely its aim to resist power and forms of governance; it is an emancipatory tool, since its purpose has always been to find better ways of living and to abolish various forms of domination and exploitation. Its main concern then always is to abolish the suffering and the social injustice caused by power, often by responding to crisis and (potential) catastrophe(s).

Research question

Since the thesis will consist of two parts, a genealogy and phenomenology of critique, the question will be twofold. The first question will be: *How does critique appear in multiple forms throughout history?* Here we will look at the many ways in which critique has manifested itself, and how it has transformed itself throughout history. Here we will also look at what meanings, value and societal implications and consequences critique can have. Since critique at some point has come to be confronted with its limitations, especially internally, we will ask: *What internal problems is critique faced with, and what are the consequences of these problems?* In the attempt to offer an answer to this question, we will first look at how critique as an intellectual practice has developed and manifested itself from modernity onwards. We will see critique's aim is usually emancipatory, meaning critique serves as a means to make us free. To let critique serve this purpose, we will see how philosophers have sought to develop critical theories and show how social, political, cultural and economic conditions should be changed in order to enable emancipatory practices. We will look at how critique as an intellectual practice is developed, and what challenges it has come to be faced with, intellectually, but also socially. For this purpose, we will first look at how critique can be defined, and how it has manifested itself as an intellectual and social practice throughout history, and from modernity onwards in more detail. Regarding the latter, we will look at how critique developed itself intellectually during the Enlightenment with Immanuel Kant and how from Enlightenment onwards some scholars have come to view Enlightened reason as a means to emancipate human beings and install them as rulers of nature and social reality. With Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt Schule we will look at how this instrumental reason

came to be coopted by scientific positivism, and by hegemonic economic forces. In response to this development, we will show how critique slowly began to change its meaning and value, since at some point it lost its emancipatory potential. We will see how cynicism, but also critique's Eurocentric character undermined it as an intellectual practice. The genealogical account and diagnosis we will offer in the first part will shed clearer light on how critique is defined in terms of its meaning and value over the course of its intellectual history, which will make it easier to ascertain what internal problems it is faced with and what consequences this entails.

Given the catastrophic risks of the 21st century discussed in the introduction we will look at what forms of power, domination and exploitation are present in society today and see how these either contribute to these catastrophic risks, or how they possibly prevent critique from developing into a form that can help deal with these catastrophic risks. Therefore in the second part the main question will be: *What contemporary forms of domination and exploitation could and should critique respond to?* To answer this question, we will try to ascertain what contemporary power/knowledge paradigm is constitutive of current forms of domination and exploitation. We will then mainly look at what techniques of power are currently employed to subjugate us to these forms and how this prevents people from becoming critical, with the consequence that the risk of catastrophes remains unchecked. In this way we will also see how power manifests itself to succeed in dominating and exploiting its subjects and impeding critique today. In other words: we will see how power attempts to prevent being challenged by critique by legitimizing the techniques it employs by reference to some common goal or conception of 'progress' and how it as such uses ideology to solidify its position.

In order to be able to challenge forms of power, critique has to find some effective form to enable itself to do so. We will argue that previous forms of critique that we have seen from the Enlightenment until its dialectical turn and cynical exhaustion is unable to fulfill this purpose. It is therefore necessary to look where and how critique manifests itself, or to look how it could do so. The third question will therefore be: *How does critique manifest itself today and what potential could it have?* In the attempt to answer this question, we will look at how our contemporary experience of reality is expressed in our cultural logic. According to meta-modernism, our current cultural logic is responding to shifts within capitalist society and culture in the West. Within this cultural logic, we see a need for critique, rising from the underlying desire to prevent catastrophes that follow in the wake of the named shifts. We will therefore look at how this need for critique is expressed, and what vocabulary for critique could be developed in response to this. According to thinkers in the field of meta-modernism, the need for critique is expressed in art and (pop)culture, however we still lack a vocabulary for critique, making it difficult to carry it through collectively and to utilize it as a means to help develop ways of thinking acting and feeling that could contribute to preventing certain catastrophes from materializing. It is also here where we will present the main argument for the need and necessity for critique. Here we will also argue for the practical necessity of critique as a means to avoid catastrophes, end social injustice and alleviate suffering.

Part I: A genealogy and diagnosis of Critique

In part I of the thesis we will historically and genealogically explore in what way critique has manifested and transformed itself throughout history. We will, on the one hand, attempt to show what intellectual and social meaning and value critique has had at certain points in history and how it has responded in particular to crisis and power, but also what problems critique has come to be faced with. In order to do so, we will first look at how critique can be defined, understood and conceptualized as both a discourse, and a social practice in the first chapter. In this chapter, we will look at Michel Foucault and the sociologist Tom Boland for the purpose of sketching this broad, partially historical overview. In this chapter it will become clear that critique does not exist in a stable form as it always has a different relationship with knowledge and power and accordingly changes its meaning and value, varying with each socio-political context. Additionally we will see critique encounters various challenges. When offering a very brief history of critique as a philosophical practice, we will elaborate more extensively on modern critique that stems from the Enlightenment, since critique became more widespread in society, yet was confronted with more challenges. Since the Enlightenment and modernity led to the birth of the critical society and a modern critical tradition, we will look at how this tradition was greatly boosted by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In the second chapter we will look at the critical tradition spurred from the Frankfurt School, which problematized Enlightened Reason and the instrumental rationality that followed from Kant's philosophy and the Enlightenment as a whole. Since we see a growing school of scholars and movement that holds true to the Enlightenment and its ideals, partially in response to the emergence of post-truth politics, and since these scholars argue a return to, revitalization of or an altogether new form of Enlightenment will lead us onwards to progress, more humaneness and therefore less suffering and more freedom¹, it is of especial importance to look at the problematic sides of Enlightened Reason as addressed by Adorno and Horkheimer.

Following Peter Sloterdijk, in his response to Adorno and Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School as a whole, we will see how the optimistic progressive ideals of Enlightenment have been replaced by a cynical collective consciousness. We will look into what sorts of consequences this has for critique as a practice that seeks to expose error, reveal truth and subvert socio-political power structures. Cynicism, as we will see, is a major contributor to the internal problems critique is faced with. With Amy Allen we will look at another internal problem of critique: its Eurocentric character and colonial history. In this final chapter we will offer a diagnosis of the state critique is in now.

This last chapter will also serve as a connection to the second part, where we will look at what power/knowledge paradigm is manifest and how critique might challenge it.

¹ As we see for instance in the widely read books of Steven Pinker where he argues that all progress is thanks to (Enlightened) Reason. In his almost Hegelian book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011) he for instance argues that the more humans have been led by reason and science, the less violent societies became. In his latest book (as of this writing) *Enlightenment Now* (2017), he makes the case that we should be led more by science, Enlightenment and humanism. Other examples are Sam Harris, Carl Sagan, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Richard Dawkins and the like, who – notably enough - are coined 'champions of reason'. These intellectuals try to publicly defend Reason and science by emphasizing in public debates that all our progress is to thank to (scientific) Reason. In the Netherlands an example is Tinneke Beeckman, with her book *Macht en Onmacht* (2015). Targets of the critique of these thinkers are usually religious thinking, postmodernism and post-truth politics.

Chapter I. A brief history and genealogy of Critique

In this first chapter we will outline a brief history of critique as a philosophical, intellectual practice and social phenomenon. The aim is not to be exact or elaborate, but to pinpoint some important moments in philosophical thinking that are relevant to critique. We will pass multiple descriptions of critique, as well as a genealogical account of it. As we will see, critique is relational since it is always aimed at something other than itself. Critique therefore ever changes alongside the things it is aimed at. As a result, critique does not exist in a stable form and changes its meaning and value alongside the things it forms a relationship towards. In this chapter, we will look at various forms of critique and at the ways it has manifested itself throughout history. With Foucault's genealogical account we will see how he sought to find out how critique as a mode of thinking and discourse is possible. According to him, critique reached a zenith during the Enlightenment and modernity. Since the Enlightenment, something like a critical society emerged and critique even became a separate philosophical discipline, as well as a distinct theoretical practice. From then on, we saw an emergence of critical theories about society that often responded not only to states of affairs within society, but to other critical theories as well. Critique itself thus became an object of research and critique. Since it is complicated to define and describe critique, we will complement Foucault's account with the genealogy of critique Tom Boland provides.

I.I Critique throughout history

Historically we can trace critique all the way back to the very beginning of Western philosophy. The consensus within academia usually is that philosophy started when humankind made the shift from *mythos* to *logos*. This shift consisted in reason's succession over the mythical attitude towards the world. When explaining reality, people no longer (only) resorted to myths, but attempted to use reason to gain knowledge of reality. Within critique we see a similar transition and it is also as old as Western philosophy itself. In mythical times we saw prophets making claims about both material and social reality. Speaking from a position of transcendence, they claimed to reveal injustice as the result of worshipping idolatry in reference to prophetic texts. Usually prophets saw their own era as one of crisis, proclaiming to be liminal figures that were opposing delusions and false prophets.² In ancient Athens (the same place the start of Western philosophy is historically traced back to) a new form of discourse towards social reality later in history emerged: *parrhesia*, literally meaning "all speaking/all saying". This was a form of public and political speech where one spoke the truth about society, thereby publicly addressing oneself to power, with a certain risk to the self. As opposed to prophetic discourse, *parrhesia* sought no recourse to prophetic texts, deities, tradition, or other external authorities; instead, it made use of reason and logic. Hence the ideal of critique: speaking truth to power, came into being.³ *Parrhesia*, as a discourse, is always bound to a certain context, since it has a certain relationship to power – often a resisting one - making it situational. In reference to reason and logic, the *parrhesiast* usually asserts that the forms of power it critiques are deluded by irrationality and ignorance, claiming that when the truth is recognized, more just and effective policy or decisionmaking can be arrived at. This means critique also seeks to expose error, or untruths to improve thinking and subsequently acting. In the words of the critical sociologist Tom Boland: "[a]t the very minimum, to critique is to expose errors, omissions or falsehoods, deliberate or inadvertent in

² Boland, 2017, p. 1

³ Ibid, p. 5

truthclaims about society.” A claim to truth thus always plays a certain role with critique, because if critique is meant to expose errors, there must be some relation to (a) truth(s).⁴

Of course, as Max Weber has shown, rationality has multiple meanings and historical manifestations.⁵ Below it will be made clear that critique also constitutes a relation to what is considered rational or not within a society and that what is considered to be rational changes throughout (sociopolitical) history. What critics define as rational can differ from what those in power, or those who are part of the mainstream, consider rational. Often, critics see themselves as not part of the mainstream, but of an opposing group of critics. This leads to a clash over what is considered rational on the part of those in power, and on the part of those who oppose it. Truth is therefore not only claimed by critics, or *parrhesiastes*, but also by those on the side of the power critics seek to subvert. Socially then, as Boland argues, critique can appear as a way to compare the truth-claims of one group with that of any other group, or as the expression of beliefs of one individual against the beliefs held in society, transforming the identity of the individual, and sometimes of a group or even society as a whole in the process. This results in opposing groups of critics. This does not mean the mainstream stands apart from the critical groups. Since the Enlightenment, Boland argues, both the critics and the mainstream remain part of one critical society, throughout which critique can spread as a whole.⁶

Critique is more than just an intellectual practice, though, where people search for truths and rationality. It is also a social phenomenon, as the practice of parrhesia and other modes of critique prove. Critique as a praxis to expose errors in truth-claims for Tom Boland is too dry and “*it underpins the colorful things as the revelation of social order as the stultifying, limiting artifice of power, the unmasking of beliefs and obfuscating ideology, the debunking of behavior as mere clichéd imitation and the exposure of social forms as dull, craven conformity.*”⁷ Also Foucault (whom we will look into more elaborately later) sees critique not only as a means to expose error, but also considers it to be an aspect of social and cultural life and a practice of problematization through the work of thought. The move critique makes is problematizing something that hitherto was seen as given. This is a social process that can effectuate certain consequences.⁸

Parrhesia, or critique, is also a performative act, since a subject, by critiquing, constitutes itself as a critiquing subject in claiming its right to speak⁹, and as such also as an interrupter.¹⁰ *Parrhesia* did not only appear as a discourse, however. For the cynics it was also a means to shape their conduct.¹¹ Thus, already in Ancient Athens *parrhesia* started to take on multiple forms.

Like prophets, *parrhesiasts* “*conceive their own time as an occasion of injustice and potential catastrophe, generally connected to ignorance and delusion on the part of power holders or society as a whole.*”¹² It would be a mistake, however, to view reason and rationality to only be on the side of the critics. Not rarely do we see power presenting itself as

⁴Boland, 2012, p.2

⁵ Ibid, p. 6

⁶Ibid, p.5

⁷Ibid, p. 3

⁸Ibid, p. 110

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Van Tuinen, (2010), p. 6

¹¹ Boland, 2016, pp. 5-6

¹² Ibid

acting from rational, reasonable grounds and further seeking to justify itself by reference to different forms of knowing and truths. As a result, power and its resistance both claim rationality, truth or reason to be on their side. In the 21st century, it is often claimed that the market is ‘rational’ and that adhering to economic principles is the only reasonable way to go, a view problematized by Wolfgang Streeck.¹³

The *parrhesiast* often positions himself in a moment of crisis and tries to deliver a timely message in order to make a decisive difference in order to avert catastrophes. Since *parrhesia* takes on this form, we will look at what 21st century crisis critique should respond to and how we also see the cultural logic respond to this with the field of meta-modernism. Critique, namely, appears within diverse cultural repertoires that inform critique.¹⁴ As we will see, contemporary critiques often respond to growing inequality (which could, critics argue, produce catastrophes), the breakdown of community, growing individualism and other catastrophic risks such as climate change and the dangers of artificial intelligence and the purposes it might come to serve.¹⁵

I.II The various inheritors of parrhesia; critique’s many manifestations

Throughout history, we can identify a variety of inheritors of *parrhesia* from religious and political revolutionaries to artists and collective social movements which all materialized in specific forms of critique. As Boland shows, critique can correspond with many ways of *thinking* that change throughout history in accordance to changes in socio-political circumstances. During the Enlightenment, for instance, we saw a modernist, scientifically informed way of thinking emerge that sought to abolish myths in order to make intellectual and social progress by means of instrumental rationality and Reason. Adorno and Horkheimer, in response to Kant and the Enlightenment more in general, devised a debunking method of myths of progress. Since critique always changes in accordance to changes in thinking and in its relation to the socio-political reality, critique is protean and adaptable to any topic or any phenomenon, by any group or individual.¹⁶ For this reason, critique can have value, meaning and a function at any time in history and below we will try to ascertain what that might be today.

Boland argues that when it comes to critique, it is difficult to make absolute discernments and offer precise definitions of what critique is, however - precisely because critique takes on multiple forms and manifests itself in various ways. As a consequence, it is difficult to discern for instance “*between critique and unmasking, debunking, defamiliarizing, exposing and revealing, or to discern precisely what is critical in cynicism or freethinking or nihilism.*”¹⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, for instance, sees cynicism as an impediment to critique and not as something critical in itself. And Foucault asked himself “*what ethical form of life is possible after the revelation that nothing is true.*”¹⁸

But what is ultimately a stable factor of critique is that it is always entangled in politics, concerning itself with notions of liberty, equality, and struggles over meaning and power. Moreover, it usually also concerns individual autonomy, especially from the Enlightenment

¹³ In his book *Buying Time. The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (2014)

¹⁴ Boland, 2012, p. 7

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 3-4

¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 7-8

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 116

onwards.¹⁹

Foucault attempted to provide a genealogical account of the way in which critique manifested itself throughout history. Foucault attempted to show how critique has transformed in his posthumously published lecture *What Is Critique?* When investigating critique, Foucault shows that critique itself is a historically contingent practice and assesses the conditions under which critical subjects emerge and what makes critical discourse circulate in certain manners.²⁰ Additionally, in analyzing critique as a concrete historical practice, Foucault comes to notice how immensely and elaborate things seem to be subjugated to critique, such as institutions, practices and discourses – especially since the Enlightenment - which also constitutes a certain relationship between critique and subjectivity.²¹ Again, the Enlightenment is given special attention and claimed to be a crucial moment in critique’s history.

Foucault argues critique consists in a certain attitude, which constitutes certain relationships to knowledge and society. It therefore always “*only exists in relation to something other than itself: it is an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be, it oversees a domain it would want to police and is unable to regulate.*”²² Critique can therefore never exist independently on itself, since it always has some relationship to its objects or discourses it critiques. In other words, critique is always critique of something and without a ‘something’ it cannot exist.²³

Foucault believes that since critique also partially consists in an attitude, its function is not only epistemic, but also has something virtuous about it. Since critique is bound up with ways of knowing, critique can lead to transformations in thinking and subsequently this transformation can influence the way people experience themselves and their social circumstances; but opposed to that, it also informs forms of governance.

Below we will look at what forms of knowing are necessary to develop for emancipatory purposes, and what light must be shed on the way people experience themselves in society, in particular regarding the moral outrage and sense of injustice they might feel within contemporary times. This means we will not only look into different ways of knowing, but also shed light on a more affective level. For this purpose, we will look with meta-modernism at structures of feeling that are expressed in contemporary cultural logics.

The critical attitude has always been a response, Foucault argues, to types of governance. As types of governance change over the centuries, our critical attitudes change accordingly. Foucault shows that powerstructures ask themselves how to govern (be it over bodies, minds, or both and additionally claiming rationality and truth to be on their side), to which societies and its citizens can ask: how *not* to be governed? The attitude that results from critique consists in a basic distrust, an art “*of not being governed, or better, the art of not being governed like that and at that cost.*”²⁴

Foucault identifies a few anchoring points of critique throughout history. First critique started as a spiritual art: a certain critical attitude to the authority of the church or certain interpretations of Scriptures, it was a form of resisting religious rule.²⁵ He names thinkers like

¹⁹Ibid, p. 8

²⁰Boland, 2017, p. 109

²¹ Ibid

²²Foucault, 2007, p. 42

²³Boland, 2017, p. 114

²⁴Foucault, 2007, pp. 44-5

²⁵Ibid, p. 45

Wycliffe and Bayle as examples. Of course *parrhesia* was not only on the side of the critics, though, since “telling all” also became a part of spiritual submission within Christianity, and of course later in the psy-sciences of counseling.²⁶ Below we will look at how “truth-telling” or “telling-all” manifests itself within the current knowledge/power paradigm.

The second anchoring point consists in not accepting certain laws constitutive of particular forms of governance as just. Critique concerns itself with the legitimacy of law, putting forward indefeasible rights that every government should respect. The third form of critique exists in not accepting as true what an authority asserts as true. Something is then only considered true when one has devised his own reasons for validity. Critique then “*finds its anchoring point in the problem of certainty in its confrontation with authority.*”²⁷ According to Foucault, critique is intertwined with relationships between “*power, truth and the subject.*” Governmentalization, respectively, is seen by Foucault as a social reality that is the result of “*mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth.*” This brings Foucault to define critique as follows: “*critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth. (...) [C]ritique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially ensure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth.*”²⁸ Critique, in this sense, appears as a discourse that creates subjects “*through a critical regime of truth and critical truth-games.*” Secondly, “*critique is a discourse which transforms and unmasks other ‘truth-claims’, replacing them with a starker vision of reality, which in the end is also a specific cultural vision.*”²⁹ Since also truth plays such a crucial role, this leads Boland to similarly argue that critique can be seen as “*a problematization of power/knowledge and its social consequences in terms of both truth and justice. In broad outline, critique posits phenomena such as suffering and delusion as socially contingent results of aggregates of power which constitute domination justified by ‘ideology’.*” Boland follows Foucault when stating that what emerges from critique’s relation to truth is “*a critical regime of truth, truth-games and a world-view.*” According to Boland “*[a] regime of truth”, provides ontological categories and epistemological justifications for dividing between the true and the false. Among other regimes of truth, critique produces subjects, discourse and practical actions which constitute the contemporary world.*”³⁰ In this sense, critique always indeed has some relationship to truth, also shown by its frequent attack towards certain truth-games and regimes of truth, thereby attempting to displace, modify or destroy them. It subsequently tries to fill the void that emerges from this by replacing the dislodged truth-claims with something else, like ‘underlying’ or ‘real’ factors.

So, critique, apart from involving a range of truth-games and producing truths in any regime of truth has an undermining effect on other truths, replacing them with much starker and less palatable visions. Beliefs we previously had are deconstructed and revealed to be nothing but fictions or illusions. The beliefs that are to replace these, are seen in contrast as necessary and inescapable, “*to which the alternative is error.*”³¹ Boland points out this reveals “*something like a double gesture in critique; those things which are believed are unmasked as merely illusory, and simultaneously they are exposed as symptoms of something else.*” In

²⁶ Boland, 2017, p. 5

²⁷ Foucault, 2007, p. 46

²⁸ Ibid, p. 47

²⁹ Boland, 2014, p. 108

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 113-4

³¹ Ibid, pp. 115-6

other words, “*the critical regime of truth divides the world ontologically between real factors and illusions about them, with an episteme of revelation or unmasking which penetrates the fog of social life and thereby produces this ontological divide.*”³²

Governance, Foucault and Boland thus show, always has to do with some claim to truth, and what constitutes truth or not is in effect a result of power relations. Any epistemic and normative ground critique could then claim to have will have to find its place somewhere within this intricate relationship.

I.III Critique since Enlightenment

Since a very profound transformation of thinking, reason and rationality occurred in the Enlightenment, and politics and truth went through corresponding profound changes, we will give a more elaborate analysis of the Enlightenment, the experience and intellectual response to it and finally its impact on power and its influence on critique. Knowledge from Enlightenment onwards became an instrument of power and led to new conflicts regarding what is considered rational or not and to new ways of governance and resistance. The deployment of “logic” as reason’s tool became a powerful force in modern history.³³ The influence of Enlightenment thinking still has contemporary relevance, since we see a growing group of intellectuals that still holds true to Enlightenment’s ideals, as well as a part of the public that is loyal to it. As said, with Enlightenment, the definition, meaning and practical consequences of rationality also profoundly changed. Rationality is especially nowadays coopted, or claimed to be on the side of those in power and argued to be the underlying mechanism of our economy and the market. Below we will see the attention Foucault gave to the Enlightenment and its relation with power and critique.

In *What is Critique* Foucault traces the historical impact Enlightened thinking proposed by Kant had from the Enlightenment to the 20th century onwards. The Enlightenment and the political influence it had in this sense leads Foucault to mark it “*as a formative stage for modern humanity.*”³⁴ When reflecting on the question ‘*What is Enlightenment?*’ Kant proposes a permanent critique of both ourselves and our era, argues Foucault.³⁵ All the transformations we have seen since gave birth to a very particular set of relations between power, truth and the subject.³⁶ Foucault seeks to trace the decisive historical moments of the Enlightenment back to Kant. Kant tried to ascertain the historical destiny of knowledge against the background of the constitution of modern science. The Enlightenment was therefore a crucial period where the relation between knowledge, science and politics had particular effects of power as a result. As we also saw above, critique has a certain relationship with rationality and power, which is visible in the increasing state power that ensued from the enlightenment onwards. The enlightenment itself can be seen as a critical movement in Kant’s reflection thereof, in his demand for the free public use of reason, but also in its resistance to governmentalization. Critique in the end then comes down to demanding ‘not to be governed thus’. In this era we also saw the rise of objectivism, positivism, technicism and other modes of thinking that connected “*this knowledge with the conditions of the constitution of and legitimacy of all possible knowledge, and finally, by*

³²Ibid

³³ Boland, 2017, p. 7

³⁴Foucault, 2007, p. 57

³⁵ Boland, 2017, p. 108

³⁶Ibid

seeing how the exit from legitimacy (...) occurred in history."³⁷ This gives us the possibility to ask ourselves the investigative question about the legitimacy of historical modes of knowing, to see what false ideas knowledge has come to manifest about itself and to what forms of dominion it has become linked.³⁸

Historical-philosophical research on the Enlightenment thus does not only consist of an inquiry into the problem of knowledge, but also into that of power, and additionally how the two are related. This makes it possible for Foucault to identify mechanisms of coercing with contents of knowledge.³⁹ They are so intrinsically related because for Foucault knowledge always conforms to a set of rules, a scientific discourse with its constraints and effects of coercion regarding scientific validation and rationality. Mechanisms of power, on the other hand, answer "*to certain procedures, instruments, means and objectives which can be validated in more or less coherent systems of knowledge.*"⁴⁰ The nexus of knowledge and power is crucial to describe, because it enables us to understand why certain systems are deemed acceptable and above all rational.⁴¹ This description should contain an analysis of the conditions of acceptability of a system, but also a possibility to "*follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence.*" In short: "*The identification of the acceptability of a system cannot be dissociated from identifying what made it difficult to accept: its arbitrary nature in terms of knowledge, its violence in terms of power, in short, its energy.*"⁴²

Characteristic of the Enlightenment was also the development of science, as well as the role it came to play in governmentalization. Policy came to be informed by scientific reason, especially with the emergence of the social sciences. As we will see, Kant had a very positive evaluation of science and its role in society. This confidence science gained to have in itself led to positivism, as argued by Adorno and Horkheimer. This later became tied to the development and founding of states, by justifying state-systems as the results of the use of reason and rationality. This aroused a new tight relationship between knowledge and power determining how productive forces are developed and how through science its techniques are increasingly being refined. This has led Foucault to ask to what extent enlightened reason is historically responsible for what excesses of power, or what forms of governmentalization.⁴³ Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the Enlightenment is indeed responsible for excesses. In short they argue that since Enlightenment sought to not only explain, but also control nature and later social reality in the attempt to free us through (scientific) knowledge. Thereby instrumental reason eventually culminated in a tool for domination and control. In other words, the form of thinking Enlightenment gave birth to caused knowledge to become an impediment to freedom, instead of being conducive to it.

We will see how Adorno and Horkheimer came to make the Enlightenment suspicious by creating "*a complete critique of positivism, objectivism, rationalization, of techné and technicalization, a whole critique of the relationships between the fundamental project of science and techniques whose objective was to show the connections between science's naïve presumptions, on one hand, and the forms of domination of contemporary society, on the*

³⁷Ibid, p. 58

³⁸Ibid, pp. 57-8

³⁹Ibid, p. 59

⁴⁰Ibid, p. 61

⁴¹Ibid, p. 62

⁴²Ibid

⁴³Foucault, 2007, pp. 50-1

other.”⁴⁴

Adorno and Horkheimer did more than only critique a mode of thinking. They also wanted to show how power employs instrumental rationality as a tool of domination. They argued that “*cold capitalist efficiency, (...) or with rationality replacing reason, or with materialist consumption triumphing over unchanging habits*”⁴⁵ was something that spurred from the Enlightenment.

Adorno and Horkheimer sought to develop a theory on what dominates us, in order to pave the way for emancipation from domination, which is yet another important aspect of critique. Critical theories, namely, usually aim “*at emancipation from oppressive social conditions.*” For this purpose, a critical theory must first formulate a theory about what oppresses us (in the case of Adorno and Horkheimer: the economic apparatus), a theory about how we might escape our oppression, and finally a theory of what a free existence without alienation or oppression would look like.⁴⁶ When a theory of oppression is formulated it usually implicitly contains a theory of emancipation as well, for being emancipated amounts partially to the opposite of being oppressed.⁴⁷ This is of course a very liberal notion of freedom, which Kant indeed formulated. For him freedom to think – or to use one’s reason - and share one’s ideas in public is what freedom amounts to. For Kant this is one of the necessary steps (others are formulated in his *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*⁴⁸, which we will not look into here) for emancipation; humans are free as soon as they throw off the shackles of their self-imposed tutelage. After Kant, however, other theories on how to emancipate humankind focused on more than just the liberal account of not being oppressed. This is why below we will give a brief overview of critical theory, its targets and emancipatory aims. Another reason to do this is to show how critique has indeed changed its meaning, value and aims over the course of intellectual history. The purpose in this thesis is to sketch out some broad outlines of critique, so as to later assess what emancipatory purpose it could serve today and to prove that critique has indeed, sometimes more and sometimes less successfully, served emancipatory goals. Critique has often been the drive behind many emancipatory movements.⁴⁹ As Tom Boland argues, “*social changes, revolutions, transformations, scientific innovation, democratic liberation, colonial emancipation, feminism and sexual politics are intrinsically bound up with critique.*”⁵⁰ This is wherein the value of critique lies and we will try to assess what value it might have today. What social changes and forms of emancipation are called for in the 21st century?

According to the article of Levi Byrant (whom goes by the pseudonym of ‘Larval Subjects’ on the website where the article *Strains of Critical Theory* comes from) critical theory can roughly be sorted “*in terms of the thought of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx*”, whom are aptly called the three masters of suspicion. This list is not exhaustive, however, since also other thinkers can be called critical. Larval Subjects name Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, Marcuse and the like.⁵¹ These and many other thinkers will fall beyond the scope of this thesis.

In their categorization Larval Subjects argue the masters of suspicion can be seen as

⁴⁴Ibid, p. 51

⁴⁵Ibid

⁴⁶Larval Subjects, 2014, *Strains of Critical Theory*

⁴⁷Ibid

⁴⁸ First published in 1784

⁴⁹Boland, 2017, Ibid, pp. 8-9

⁵⁰Ibid

⁵¹ Larval Subjects, 2014

proponents of “*critical theories of power, desire and economy*” and as such provide us with theories “*of what organizes social relations.*” Within Nietzschean theories (of which Foucault is perhaps an adherent), morality is seen as a tool of power. Foucault additionally argues that social institutions like prisons are likewise part of the techniques of power, in this case a disciplinary one.⁵²

Freudian theories, on the other hand, think that desire organizes how we live and thus constitute our social relations.⁵³

With Marx, we get yet again another form of critical theory. According to Marxian theories, our social relations and our consciousness are determined by material reality, in the case of Marx by the means of production and class relations. Opposed to Hegel, Marx argues our thinking and consciousness are not expressed in (socio-political) reality, but rather the other way around. Those with the means of production, control the social order and those lacking of means of production are alienated, exploited and dominated. So for Marx social organization is determined by economic forces. This means that when people seek to emancipate themselves, they need to eradicate the injustices that result from material praxis. According to Marx, all social ills can be traced back to the system of production and likewise all forms of injustice can be overcome by creating a just system of production. This is why capitalism has to be opposed, according to Marxist theories.⁵⁴ Just changing our thinking (or interpretations of the world) and becoming more rational will not be enough, which we can see as a critique to both Kant and Hegel.

With Marx, critique went through profound changes. Since Marx, also ideology and the economy became objects of critique. Since then, we often see that critique offers strong judgements about the social phenomenon it claims to reveal, arguing that certain ‘beliefs’ are ideological, phenomena that control people because they are naïvely and unreflexively accepted (leading to ‘false consciousness’ as Marx and adherents to his theory often argue). The structures are then exposed as mere social constructions and the consequences they have are exposed and often argued to be impediments to freedom. This implies critique “*appears as a practice of freedom wherein the individuals take themselves and their present circumstances as an object of reflection, and make an ethical stand.*”⁵⁵ Like Boland shows, critique in one of its manifestations formulates generalized conceptions “*about society as a social construct, institutions as the vehicles of power, culture as legitimating illusions, and about subjects, either conceptualized as heroic, embattled critics or docile pawns. Often, it also carries idealistic or utopian visions about what society could or should become.*” With Marx, for instance, the superstructure of society was seen as providing culture with its legitimating illusions; Marx’ utopian vision of how society should become was one where the means of production are equally shared. Another example: with Adorno and Horkheimer the economic apparatus and the culture industry were seen as vehicles of power, where the latter legitimized illusions and deluded the great masses, whom they saw as docile pawns. As already addressed in the introduction, this has a cynical undertone. We will look into this more elaborately in a later chapter.

Marxist critique and also some theories of the Frankfurt School have in common that they do not always offer alternative beliefs, but rather posit a position beyond beliefs. The critical

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Boland, 2017, p. 110

optic will make people see the ‘truth’, thereby showing a society where no ideology remains.⁵⁶ A lot of critical theories additionally contain negations and are focused on negativity, that is to say, at that which alienates or dominates us. Frequently, the economic order is made the target of critique, starting with Marx, and carried on later by thinkers such as Adorno and Horkheimer, and much later with Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s critique of neoliberal economy.⁵⁷ The latter show that the ‘projective’ spirit of capitalism poses a significant threat to critique, as is discussed in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Here it is argued that this new capitalism cultivates engagement and ‘excellence’ in the workplace. Management is harnessed as the ethos of innovation and dynamism. It poses a danger to critique because it “*absorbs, incorporates and even profits from critiques against it.*” Instead of effectuating anything, employees use all creative talents they could harness to exploit creativity and authenticity.⁵⁸

Obviously there are many tensions and disagreements between these types of theories. For instance, we see tensions between Foucault and Marx. For Foucault merely transforming the economic system is not enough. With Foucault we also need to emancipate ourselves of disciplinary and bio-power, which cannot be solely traced back to economic exploitation, even though one of the goals of disciplinary and bio-power is to produce economically useful individuals and societies. And of course Foucault later sought ways to develop counter-conduct, involving a care of the self and a search for new forms of subjectivity. Through the care of the self, the subject sets limits to the rule of others, opposing it through self-rule. This makes critique “*the ethical foundation to counter-conduct*” where the subject not only disobeys, but shapes his own life-conduct.⁵⁹ More broadly, critique for Foucault always exists within relations between subjects, governmental power/knowledge and resistance and operates as a discourse. Part of Foucault’s critical practice is problematizing discourses, which comes down to drawing attention “*to the ways things are seen, the sorts of categories through which social phenomenon are perceived and constructed. Analyzing a ‘discourse’ means diagnosing and recognizing its effects and consequences and oftentimes disrupting the ‘truth-claims’ of the discourse or critiquing it.*”⁶⁰ Through critical discourse, power-relations, other structures and their ideological coverings are posited, thereby constructing a social world in a cultural specific way. With Foucault we can see that critique can operate as a modifier of other discourses and finally as an arsenal of discursive practices.⁶¹ Critical discourses that appear in one form or another are often formed within concrete contexts, thereby constituting all sorts of institutions. Critique formulates modes of (counter-)conduct, lifestyles, protests and the like. It is usually future orientated.⁶²

To name another tension, Foucault also distinguishes himself from the Frankfurt School as according to him critique as a discourse does not reveal truth (as they thought to do about society), but produces it in historically specific ways. Foucault’s analysis also differs from critical practices characteristic of the Frankfurt School in the sense that he does not delve into matters such as legitimacy or in the exposure of errors and illusions.⁶³ Foucault also moved

⁵⁶Ibid

⁵⁷Boland, 2014, pp. 11-2

⁵⁸Ibid, pp. 11-2

⁵⁹Boland, 2017, p. 111

⁶⁰Ibid, p. 108-10

⁶¹Ibid

⁶²Ibid

⁶³Ibid, pp. 109-10

beyond the form of critique that shows an inclination to judge by denouncing, condemning, demolishing or destroying another's ideas. Opposed to that form of criticism, Foucault seems to strive for a more affirmative practice, because in a world of "*infinite possibilities for curiosity and communication*" he "*would much prefer a criticism which would bring ideas and things to life, which would 'multiply not judgements but sings of existence'*".⁶⁴

Further below we will look at how critique can be valuable as something that negates, as opposed to something that affirms, as we see with Foucault.

When we look at Deleuze and Guatari, Larval Subjects add, we must also overcome the relations of desire and power "*that lead us to our own oppression.*"⁶⁵

When comparing Marx and Freud, we also see significant differences. Freud and Lacan were very pessimistic when it comes to emancipatory projects, because they "*see the source of much social oppression as residing in ineradicable conflicts pertaining to desire.*" Since capitalism thrives on the exploitation of our desires, whether they are created by capitalism itself or not, capitalism will be very hard to oppose. Even when our economic systems were to be transformed, they argue, the problems with human desire would remain. Freud would even argue it's better to learn how to live with repressive structures than attempt to overcome them. This reminds us of the stoics, who argue that we must not so much change the world, but rather the way we think.⁶⁶ Also the Stoics were concerned with leading a life more in accordance with Reason. This seems to lead us back to Kant, whom also, as we will see, sees the path to progress and emancipation to be derivable from within, namely our rationality.

And this brings us back to the Enlightenment. Since indeed the Enlightenment caused such major transformations in knowing, subjectivity and governmentalization and since a new form of (also scientifically informed) rationality emerged, we will give a more elaborate analysis of the Enlightenment and Kant's take on it. Kant was very optimistic towards the progressive potential of Enlightenment for emancipation through knowledge. According to Boland, this has had quite some consequences for critique. From modernity onwards, critique came to be guided by the light of reason or by experimental data (and thus, we might claim, the scientific method), by way of inspiration and sudden insight, and since Kant more rarely by using the standards of tradition, or dogma, that contributes to our tutelage, according to Kant.⁶⁷ Since Kant and modernity, Boland argues, we live in an age of critique and critique is a typical aspect of modern society. With modernity a critical society as a whole emerged which goes beyond mere critical individuals (such as *parrhesiasts*) or groups.⁶⁸ With modernity something peculiar is at work, according to Boland, namely the coming into existence of "*a group with collective solidarity and shared beliefs and values*"; and "*society becomes a matter for thought and reflection.*" Society is then coined as problematic, and it is this problematization that is critical.⁶⁹ This means that from modernity onwards critique helps form both ourselves, and society. Critique can be seen as a crucial part of modern history, but also as a dynamic force in that it generates ruptures between older and newer ways of experiencing. This is why critique is a modern phenomenon, because it consists of a break or rupture with tradition, and these ruptures especially occur in times of crisis. Critique either responds to these crises in a certain way, or it amplifies, exacerbates and creates crises. This

⁶⁴Ibid, p.111

⁶⁵ Larval Subjects, 2014

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷Ibid

⁶⁸Ibid

⁶⁹Ibid

happens when it deconstructs discourses that support certain social forms of being.⁷⁰

Critique also underwent other profound changes with modernity. Characteristic of Enlightenment critique, namely, is that it sees itself as a means to overcoming all myth. However, this belief in critique may be seen as just as mythical, because the utopia of emancipation or rationality – as seen by Kant - is idealized by critique.⁷¹ This is of course what Adorno and Horkheimer argued to be typical of enlightened critique: it dialectically became a myth itself in its attempt to overcome and expose all myths, as we will see in the chapter dedicated to them. This leads to the ironic conclusion that we no longer recognize the contingency of our own truth-claims, which is as mythical as the myths critique seeks to expose and thus acritical. Whatever vision of the world is offered by critique, it is not necessarily more factual than the supposed myth it revealed. It is nothing other than a specific cultural vision. The critical vision, in offering proclaimed revelations, prioritizes truth over meaning, thereby offering stark and sometimes even apocalyptic visions of the world we live in. This delivers us with the problem of nihilism, according to Boland, and it is for this reason he thinks Boltanski and Foucault discuss this problem. Boltanski seeks to condemn nihilism and replace it with ‘genuine’ opposition to domination, whereas Foucault focuses on the question “*of what ethical form of life is possible after the revelation that nothing is true.*”⁷²

Since one of the research objects of this thesis is to illustrate whether and how thinking and knowledge in relation to critique has an emancipatory role, we will first look at how Kant saw knowledge as a means to reach Enlightenment, freedom and progress and what modern way of knowing and critique this has culminated in. Below we will look at how and why Kant saw knowledge to be conducive for freedom. We will complement our analysis with a critical reading of Kant through the work of Emanuel Levinas, who argued that Kantian and other forms of enlightened philosophy can make the individual subject free, but that this goes to the expense of the Other. As a result, while the knowledge accumulating subject becomes more free, this can only be done by excluding or usurping the Other. This shows that critical theories do not only respond to each other within their own field of philosophy. In this instance, we see a thinker from the tradition of phenomenology deliver critique to Enlightenment thinking, but also to a form of political and moral philosophy. Since this thesis will be a critical work in itself, the reading of Kant will in itself be critical.

I.IV Immanuel Kant, Enlightenment and freedom

*“Our age is in especial degree the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit.”*⁷³

In his paper on Enlightenment, Kant argued that the growth and right application of knowledge (by exposing errors and enhancing the understanding of ourselves, the world and society) will lead us to progress and more freedom. His paper can be partially seen as the logical conclusion of his investigation regarding under what conditions certain forms of knowledge are possible for us.⁷⁴ This led him to famously ask: ‘*What can we know?*’ in his

⁷⁰ Boland, 2017, p. 111

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 116

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason*, quoted from the notes to *What is Enlightenment*, 2007, p. 37

⁷⁴ See the article *Strains of critical theory* by Larval Subjects acquired on 22-4-2018 from: <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2014/07/27/strains-of-critical-theory/>

Critique of Pure Reason. For Kant, as we will see, critique is necessary to reveal both what makes knowledge possible, and what its limits are, in order to ultimately advance knowledge. As argued, this led to profound changes to what knowledge is and how reason is viewed as a critical apparatus. This resulted in knowledge becoming an object of research. Kant sought to show under what conditions (scientific) knowledge is possible. These conditions, he showed, lie within man himself, in his categories of the mind. One of the consequences of his philosophy is that since then the subject appeared as a transcendental empirical doublet, as is shown by Foucault in *The Order of Things*. Another consequence is that from then onwards, man came to be seen as both the foundation and possibility of all knowledge.

According to Levinas, there lies something egotistical and egocentric in this way of thinking. He argues that when the subject sees itself as the condition and possibility of knowledge, it falsely believes to be self-sufficient and therefore in no need of any Other or relationship towards the Other for his thinking. Kant makes the move of placing the subject in the center of being and to consider itself as a totality, leading to a conception of the self as an “unity of the I, in which all knowing is self-sufficient.”⁷⁵ What is problematic about this, for Levinas, is that Kant’s philosophy makes us self-centered, which makes it impossible to be engaged with any otherness, ultimately leading to the nullification of the Other.⁷⁶ Levinas comes to call this ‘egology’ of the *I* that thinks and seeks to make everything representational in its mind. When the *I* through thinking and knowing constitutes itself, it can only do by means of the exclusion of the Other. Every otherness, namely, is reduced to the sameness, or totality of the *I*. Consequently, Levinas believed, the Western subject becomes unable to ethically deal with the Other, usurping it, and the whole world under the categories of knowing.

For Kant growth in knowledge is only possible when we first ascertain what limits there are to our knowing. When the conditions are set and growth in knowledge is made possible, this will lead to Enlightenment. For Kant, Enlightenment can only be achieved when people have the freedom and ability to think for themselves and make the knowledge they accumulate communicable. When freedom to do so is granted, the growth in knowledge, Kant argues, will lead to more freedom and scientific progress. The latter, he believed, could be increasingly employed to serve human ends. For this purpose, Kant first investigated what the conditions for our knowledge are. He showed the functioning of our own epistemic apparatus, that is equipped with ‘forms of the understanding’, which he called ‘categories’. Knowledge is dependent on how these categories operate. Both our possibilities and our limitations lie therein.⁷⁷ This led Kant to famously argue that we can only gain knowledge of how the world appears to us, mediated by our forms of understanding. In other words, Kantian critique therefore consists of a reflexive investigation of the mind.⁷⁸

Levinas traces a violent tendency in this mode of thinking. According to him, the categories or schemata that Kant proposes leads to the violent tendency of forcing everything to be made to fit in these categories, through a representational move. This reduces everything to intellectual concepts, that are in turn mediated by these schemata.⁷⁹ Kant thus seems to be solely fixated upon thinking for oneself, individually. Even though knowledge has to be

⁷⁵ Levinas, 1998, p. 125

⁷⁶ Levinas, 1998, p. 2 & cf. Critchley, 2015, p. 15

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Critchley, 2015, p. 2 & 6

communicable for Kant, and this communication can lead to even more progress in knowledge, he does not really seem to speak in terms of intersubjectivity. It remains unclear, with Kant, how the communication of knowledge should go about, nor does he speak of plurality or inclusiveness, thereby leaving it unclear how he thinks that others should be included in the communication of knowledge. For whom then, we might ask Kant, will emancipation be achieved?

Kant seemed unaware of the violent tendency of enlightened thinking and believed we had a duty to increase and amplify our knowledge, by using our capacity for knowing with the restriction that we should be aware of the limits of our knowledge, of which he expected only good things to happen. Our primordial responsibility is then “*to know knowledge.*”⁸⁰ Our duty, in other words, is to increase and improve our knowledge through thinking, both independently from experience in our *a priori* forms of judgement and mediated by empirical experience through *a posteriori* judgements. This led Kant to formulate another critical dimension in his attempt to find out “*why reason so insistently is drawn towards transgressing the boundaries of reason; why it so insistently seeks knowledge of things it cannot know.*” These things can be *thought*, however, and Kant argued that the purpose of Reason is to “*systematize our knowledge and to strive for moral perfection.*” For Kant these ideas have a regulative function, and as such these Ideas must always serve the abovementioned ends. When ideas serve these ends, and respect the limits of our knowledge, Reason will function well.⁸¹ Greatly inspired by the scientific progress in his time (by scientists like Newton) Kant believed our ability for gaining objective knowledge and the freedom to do so, would also lead to great scientific improvements, which he saw as able to serve humankind and its goals. Kant’s philosophy thus is characterized by a positivistic conception of knowledge and science.

Levinas again sees something violent within this mode of thinking and calls it a utilitarian stance towards the world, since every exteriority (nature, or other human beings) is thereby taken possession of, while the *I* that thinks assumes that “*in the act of grasping, between the thinkable and the thinking, that the appearing of the world is also a giving of itself, and that the knowledge of it is a satisfaction, as if it fulfilled a need.*”⁸² This is relatable to Kant, since he thought that as soon as we increasingly gain knowledge over exterior nature, the more we are able to emancipate ourselves from it.

Kant additionally also proposed an ethic fitting with his ideals for Enlightenment. For the conception of ethical ideas, we must also make critical use of our Reason, which serves to formulate regulative ideas and is related not to knowable, but thinkable things. Kant formulated his ethics as an answer to: ‘*What should I do?*’. Once we know how to use our own reason and to what extent, we must autonomously come to an ethic by obeying what our own reason prescribes in asking ourselves critically what would be reasonable to do, independent of any external or internal contingent drives. For this purpose we must critically ask ourselves if we can want the maxims we follow as our guide for action to become a universal law. Formulated otherwise, we must always respect human beings as ends in themselves, and never use them as a mere means, for they too are endowed with reason and autonomy, in which their dignity lies.

Finally, with his question ‘*What might I hope for?*’ Kant sought to expand the function he

⁸⁰Foucault, 2007, pp. 48-50

⁸¹Larval Subjects, 2014, *Strains of Critical Theory*

⁸²Ibid, p. 126

ascribed to Reason to society as a whole. So apart from Reason's role to increase and improve our rationality and increase and amplify our knowledge, and in addition to providing people with an ethical framework as individuals, he also wanted to point out how we might arrive at a realm of 'rational ends' on a collective level. To reach this realm, Kant argued, the critical individual use of reason is not enough. In order to let the light of Reason shine over society as a whole, conditions must be provided for people to let this light shine freely. This led Kant to reflect on the question where Enlightenment on a societal level consists in, to which he offered his answer in his famous essay *What is Enlightenment?* In this essay Kant defined Enlightenment as "*man's release from his own self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another.*"⁸³

Thinking, for Kant, is thus an undertaking that takes effort. It's a form of competence, which the guardians would happily take over by kindly offering their superintendence.⁸⁴

The release from tutelage that Kant stressed is hard to attain individually. The individual has become too accustomed and comfortable with blindly following his guardians, Kant argues, but more importantly, individuals have never been provided with the freedom to try out the making use of their own reason.⁸⁵

Given that it is hard to enlighten ourselves individually, Enlightenment has more chances of succeeding when freedom is endowed to the public, Kant argued.⁸⁶

Thus Kant seems to imply the revolution must come from within, through our thinking, and not so much by changing our external impediments to freedom and free, rational thinking.⁸⁷

Kant emphasizes again that freedom must be given in order to attain this change in thinking, and he now specifies what: "*the freedom to make public use of one's reason at every point.*" Only this will bring about Enlightenment.⁸⁸

Thus the scholar has "*complete freedom, even the calling, to communicate to the public all his carefully tested and well-meaning thoughts on that which is erroneous[.]*"⁸⁹

We can thus see that Kant has a conception of human progress which for him lies in the improvement of and through our thinking, which is additionally being formulated as a human right.⁹⁰

With his suggestions for Enlightenment, Kant seems to be very focused on the individual, and then especially on scholars; thus with people privileged enough to strive for the increase in knowledge, or the pursuit of science. Kant thought Enlightenment is achievable only by a society at large when knowledge is communicable. This resonates with an argument provided by Hannah Arendt. She argued a society will only be just when it is plural. This can only be achieved when as many others as possible are allowed into the public domain and be made able to freely express themselves as unique individuals, but also in their judgements. For Arendt, we cannot be the sole authors of our thinking and narrative. Instead, it is carried

⁸³Kant, 2007, p. 29

⁸⁴Ibid, pp. 29-30

⁸⁵Ibid, p. 30

⁸⁶Ibid

⁸⁷Ibid, pp. 30-1

⁸⁸Ibid, pp. 31-2

⁸⁹Ibid, p. 32

⁹⁰Ibid, pp. 34-5

onwards by a multiplicity of others, and not only by a scholar that is able to think freely for himself. It is therefore also unforeseeable who contributes to this narrative, nor can we predict what consequences this will have for our own acting and thinking. The exchange of thoughts should therefore consist of more than scholars solely sharing the results of their use of reason and the communication of knowledge.⁹¹ For Levinas, the exchange of thoughts should be based on an egalitarian relation with the other. There should be a common understanding whereby the one and the other do not simply pour the thoughts into the mind of the other. Rather, it should be a relation of common understanding where one does not overwhelm the other with the pouring of thoughts into the mind of the other, but it is a common content through understanding. Only then will sociality be constituted.⁹² In other words, only the exchange of the findings of the scholar to the public, or between scholars is not enough for emancipation.

When reflecting on the value and meaning of critique regarding Kant's philosophy, we see that critique for him has the function to advance our knowledge and utilize the insights this yields for human purposes. What those purposes are is made clear by Kant in the previously mentioned *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte*. Kant seemed to assume that whatever accumulation of knowledge will result from Enlightenment, it will unproblematically lead to more freedom and the better serving of human ends.

We also see a very liberal notion of critique's function with Kant, since for him freedom to think and share one's thoughts is sufficient to reach Enlightenment. What Kant therefore with his critique responds to is self-imposed tutelage, but also to modes of governance that do not grant the ability to people to think for themselves. The form of domination Kant thus responds to is tutelage, whether imposed internally by individuals themselves, or by external forces. With Kant we see little catastrophic thinking, perhaps only implicitly in the sense that for Kant not granting freedom to think undermines human dignity and will stop us from making progress and being free. Other enlightened thinkers, however, saw barbarism, as opposed to Enlightenment, as something catastrophic.

Kant did not predict that knowledge instead of a means to freedom, can be instrumentalized as a tool of power and domination. The more knowledge is gained, the better power is able to justify, rationalize and effectuate itself, as we also saw with Foucault above. So instead of knowledge being a tool of emancipation, it can become a tool of domination. Knowledge is indeed not only a potential impediment to power, it *is* power.

With Kant and the Enlightenment as a whole, we can also distill a profoundly optimistic belief in reason, rationality, progress and science. Additionally, Kant also had a certain conception of man. For Kant, human beings have the potential for being rational and autonomous, thus sovereign over the choices they make and of their thinking, the results of which they can share at the benefit of themselves and society in general. This conception of man, however, also led to the disciplining of all that are not rational and autonomous, as shown again by Foucault. With the quote we opened in this paragraph, we could perhaps also see a dominant tendency in Kant's critique. He states everything must submit to it, which maybe leads to what Levinas also shows, to not letting any otherness be, anything not subjected to critique yet.

⁹¹ d'Entreves, Maurizio Passerin, Hannah Arendt, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Obtained on 24-06-2018 from:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/arendt/>

⁹² Levinas, 1998, p. 7

We could thus say that Kant's answer to the question '*What is man?*' paved the way for the social sciences, since man became not only the foundation of knowledge, but also an object of research itself. As already argued, nature came to be seen as controllable and malleable during the Enlightenment. By doing so, man hoped to free itself from the bounds of nature. Not only nature, however, came to be seen as something manageable, but human beings as well. Politics, as a result, has made use of the enlightened mode of 'knowing' to control human beings through surveillance and discipline, as is shown by Foucault.⁹³ This was necessary with the rise of specialization within the workforce, and the rise of modern capitalism. The economy, but also forces of domination in general, were in need of able, productive bodies. Since the field of labor increasingly specialized, indeed 'rational' and 'autonomous' individuals were required. The way human beings came to be viewed had consequences for how society dealt with 'the other': with individuals that deviated from the norm of rationality and autonomy. Since modernity, deviated individuals were segregated from society and institutionalized in prisons, schools, factories or institutions for the insane. The norm that Kant and later the social sciences claimed to have ascertained, propagated the norm as a universal essence. Individuals came to view and experience themselves as autonomous beings. Discipline then served to tactically align individuals in their productive functioning.⁹⁴

We will look into these matters in the paragraph on the dialectic of the Enlightenment, which is seen as one of the most influential critical theories. Before we do so, however, we will look at Hegel's philosophy. Like Kant, Hegel attempted to show how we can reach freedom by use of reason, and rationality. Unlike Kant, however, Hegel attempted to show how rationality can be perceived in the patterns of the unfolding of history, which he saw as a progressive development of the human Spirit (Geist). Hegel believed that the unfolding of the human Spirit could be seen as a journey towards Absolute Knowledge, the development of which would make human beings increasingly free.⁹⁵ Below we will argue why Hegel's philosophy can be properly called a critical one and show how it contributed to the development of critical thinking and Critical Theory.

I.V Hegel: Reason, knowledge, historicity and Freedom

Like Kant, Hegel conceived of knowledge as an emancipatory instrument. Whereas Kant would look at human reason in terms of its cognitive and practical aspects, to inquire the nature and limits of rationality by means of a critique thereof, Hegel's critique "*took the form of an internal or immanent examination of the various sources of deception, illusion, and distortion that the mind undergoes in its journey to Absolute Knowledge.*" Such an activity is always critical. In Hegel's terms, it is "negative", "*precisely because it entails a conception of liberation from historical sources of domination and coercion.*"⁹⁶

Reading this, we can understand the profound influence Hegel had on critical theory, spreading all the way from Adorno and Horkheimer, to Byung Chul Han, who all see critical activity as a "negative" one where one places negations towards forms of domination and exploitation, as we shall see in the chapters where we will discuss them.

Hegel can to some extent be seen as both an Enlightenment thinker, and a critical one, in this 'negative' sense. As an Enlightenment thinker, Hegel sought to free human agents from coercive illusions, since he saw those as impediments to our capacities for free thought and

⁹³ Oosterling, 2011, pp. 264-5

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 266

⁹⁵ Smith, 1987, p. 99

⁹⁶ Ibid

action. As a critical thinker about our social reality, Hegel sought to free us from those forms of social life that are the result of coercive illusions. In other words: *“Philosophical critique necessarily spills over into social theory.”*⁹⁷

Hegel thought that history expresses an immanent telos of liberation.⁹⁸ As we shall see, the rational movement in history towards more freedom, can be found in later critical theories as well. The challenge to types of theory like this is of course that if Hegel’s idea cannot be supported, it will be hard to believe in critique’s potential of fostering absolute truth, as for the founding of the project of human emancipation on a stable ground of intelligibility.⁹⁹ With the rise of deconstructionist and (post)structuralist theories, we have seen Hegel’s notions be undermined, as for instance we also see in the work of Foucault. According to some, this has also led to the end of historicity in critical theory and other intellectual domains, which makes it hard to see history as a social-cultural learning process. Later we will see this and other forms of challenges to critical theory. With meta-modernism we will look at the return of historicity and what this means for the potential of critique.

For Hegel, critique serves to problematize historical forms of consciousness, by means of negation. This creates a moment of negativity *“where these forms of consciousness are shown to contain incoherences, anomalies, and contradictions that undermine their own certainty.”* In this sense, there lies a rational necessity in history, leading to a progressive deepening and reflexivity and enrichment of the mind.¹⁰⁰

In overcoming historical forms of knowing and to increase knowledge’s growth towards the endpoint of Absolute Knowledge he sought to develop a rational reconstruction of the historical development of thought. Philosophy’s purpose then is to provide an interconnected grasp of experience as a whole. This enterprise, for Hegel, presupposes a circle. He is as such concerned with the foundations of all possible knowledge.¹⁰¹

With his critique, Hegel sought to further develop a theory of critique, which for him consisted of an internal, immanent examination within existing forms of knowledge, and not a delimitation of standards for cognitive acceptability. Hegel rather worked with the existing modes of cognition that are already at hand. This means that we do not have to investigate the limits to knowledge, but *“need only test the knowledge in question against itself.”*¹⁰²

For Hegel, the inquiry into consciousness consists of the comparison it makes to itself, and additionally to show – like Kant – how science is possible. The dialectical process that ensues from the former, can be seen as a dialectic process that is executed upon itself. It is this that Hegel calls experience, or history.¹⁰³

Hegel’s theory can also be deemed critical in the sense that it serves to unmask *“various forms of self-deception, delusion and mystification that consciousness suffers”* in its dialectic development. This of course reminds us of Marx, Nietzsche and the Frankfurt School¹⁰⁴, the latter of which we will also look into.

Hegel was greatly inspired by the ancient sceptics, to which he attributes the discovery of negative or critical thinking. The value of skepticism for Hegel lies in its ability to dissolve

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ Ibid, pp. 99-100

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 100

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 102

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 103

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 104

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 107

certainties, commonsense thinking and everyday experience. It thus makes fluid, mobile and flexible “*what to the ordinary mind appears as fixed and concrete.*” Hegel was careful not to drive skepticism to extremes, though, since he feared that would lead to a form of nihilism, resulting in that “*self-consciousness itself loses its equilibrium and becomes driven hither and thither in unrest, fear, and anguish.*”¹⁰⁵ As we have seen, Foucault fears nihilism in the sense that it might form an impediment to creating an ethical lifeform where we perform counter-conduct and with Peter Sloterdijk we will see how developments towards nihilism result in cynicism, which also poses a major challenge to critique. When skepticism is driven too far such that it produces these type of results, then in Hegelian terms we can say this leads to an inability to learn from experience¹⁰⁶, since there is no objective epistemic and normative foundation to base a critique on. This is why Hegel sees skepticism as something purely negative, it can only negate, it produces no affirmative results, making it insufficiently developmental. In other words, it can only destroy, and cannot create.¹⁰⁷

Hegel sought to develop a more positive skepticism, one which does not only negate, but also establishes and affirms. Skepticism is a generalized form of negation that undermines every stability, certainty and objectivity. Hegel’s negation is more determinate, in the sense that it only negates what it is targeting in the negating move, in Hegel’s terms some specific previous form of consciousness. The historical change Hegel thus reveals, “*arises out of a negation of some previous negation.*” Resultantly “*every form of consciousness is the product of a critique or “negation” of some previous form of consciousness.*”¹⁰⁸ This makes Hegel’s thinking particularly critical, since “*it does not merely accept what a body of thought, a philosophical system, or even an entire culture says about itself, but is concerned to confront that thought, system or culture with its own internal tensions, incoherences, and anomalies.*” Next to it being negating, it is constructive, since the result of negation or confrontation, can lead us to more “*complete, comprehensive, and coherent bodies of propositions and forms of life.*” As such, Hegel’s philosophy consists of a dynamic developmental structure “*by which human arrangements become progressively more adequate as a result of the tensions and contradictions that brought them into being.*”

Hegel thought to have revealed some rational necessity in history, of which Hegel also discerned a practical kind of necessity. This is related “*with those events or states of affairs that it is in our power to produce or prevent.*” It implies that certain causes are under human control, “*where a human agent chooses to bring about some state of affairs different from what is on the basis of his understanding of his situation and his forming an intention to change it.*”¹⁰⁹

According to Hegel, there can also be found rational mechanisms within historical movements independent of the actions of human agents, but when it comes to the latter, he believes human agents to be driven “*by a powerful common interest in rational freedom.*”¹¹⁰ With Hegel we see a tension emerging, however, between the extent to which human beings serve purposes and the extent they have purposes. The ends of reason, are set according to Hegel, but the means by which those ends are achieved are not. When it comes to intentional actions on the part of human agents and the unintended consequences they lead to, Hegel tries

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 109

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 110

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 111

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 112

to grasp that in his concept of the “*cunning of reason*.” By means of this concept, Hegel sees catastrophes and largescale social chaos and human suffering as a movement in history that will eventually lead to an increase in freedom. The most influential counterargument made to this concept is that the atrocities of the 20th century are hard to explain away by reference to this concept as a means to realize humanity’s freedom. The belief that only that which serves the end of reason can persist, is heavily undermined by these atrocities, in other words.¹¹¹

We could say if any causal effectivity spurring from human agents is doubted, then cynicism might be the consequence, since human beings will consider themselves as powerless subjects being dragged along by mechanisms outside of their control. This belief, as we will see with Sloterdijk, forms a significant impediment to critique. Among other things, we will see that when people consider themselves as mere parts of a telos and when a theodicy explains all suffering and evil away by the alleged positive outcomes they lead to¹¹², this leads to a cynical self-consciousness.

Hegel, however, still believed that history is an intelligible, progressive whole, leading to greater degrees of freedom for a growing number of people. Absolute Knowledge would lead us to a state of satisfaction, not only intellectually, but also morally.¹¹³ For him, the progressive evolution of truth could be seen in the diversity of philosophical systems. This implies that all philosophical systems and forms of life are a part of an ongoing, progressive dialectic. Knowledge as such takes on the form of a system, containing rational harmony and coherence.¹¹⁴

According to Emmanuel Levinas, this is exactly what makes Hegel’s philosophy problematic in the sense that it is violent in its inclination to negate. It negates all otherness, in order to make the system of thought whole. Every multiplicity is thereby reduced to a totality. All otherness is thereby brought back to the sameness of Hegel’s totalizing system, that negates all otherness to make it whole.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, what is most violent of this philosophy is that totality is only possible by virtue of the violent exclusion of the Other.¹¹⁶ In this sense it “*is a philosophy of both absolute knowledge and the satisfied man*.” As seen above, Hegel sees history as a triumph of reason and it “*triumphs over all otherness and it is therein, ultimately, that its very rationality resides*” and this refers to “*the unity of the I think [which] is the ultimate form of the mind as knowledge. And all things lead back to this unity of the I think in constituting a system.*”¹¹⁷

Apart from providing a phenomenology of the mind, Hegel also defined truth as having a social component when it comes to the justification of beliefs. Knowledge is seen as the result of intersubjective agreement, as we also see with Jürgen Habermas. Truth therefore emerges from a community.¹¹⁸ In this sense, judgements are “*the outcome of discussion, persuasion and dialogue.*”¹¹⁹ Despite the differences between Hegel and Habermas, both believe “*that the inquiry into the conditions of truth may prepare the way for a deliberation on the justice of particular social arrangements.*” Additionally, they view the community as the standard of

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 115

¹¹² Cf. ibid

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 117

¹¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 118-9

¹¹⁵ Critchley, 2015, p. 2 & 6

¹¹⁶ Welten, 2011, pp. 154-5

¹¹⁷ Levinas, 1998, p. 126

¹¹⁸ Smith, 1987, p. 120

¹¹⁹ Ibid

not only truth, but also all other values.¹²⁰

The question is if a consensus condition of truth indeed enhances freedom. Whether intentional or not, such a conception of truth might also form an impediment to freedom. Although Habermas argues that people intersubjectively decide on social justice matters, truth and freedom, there is no reason to exclude the possibility that some are excluded from such an intersubjective process. If that is the case, not everyone gets to decide on the legitimacy of social and political institutions, for instance.

When forming a community, or an interpersonal relationship, there will always be excluded third parties, according to Levinas. For him, an all too intimate community is exclusionary, which he formulates metaphorically, by stating that it “*consists of two people, I and thou. We are among ourselves. Third parties are excluded.*”¹²¹ We can only attain justice, according to Levinas, when we answer to the appeal for justice of third, excluded parties.¹²² With Amy Allen we will later see that Hegel’s and Habermas’s philosophy exclude postcolonial others from these dialogues, which makes Hegel’s condition for truth and justice deficient. Hegel hoped history, despite the struggle of human beings that are inherent to it, would lead human beings to achieve complete satisfaction through intellectual and moral mastery over ourselves and the world and was perhaps more positive than Levinas on rationality’s role in this.¹²³

Like we introduced, Enlightenment had many responses, some critical, others more affirmative. Since the Enlightenment is gaining contemporary relevance as shown in the tendency of some to think a return or revitalization of the Enlightenment has critical relevance for solving the problems of society today, it is of importance to look into the limits of Enlightenment, of which we already saw a few in the last two paragraphs. To expand on this, we will look at one of the most influential critiques to Enlightenment in the next paragraph; that of Adorno and Horkheimer - which at the same time was of major influence on the direction critique took in the 20th century.

I.VI Enlightenment as impediment to critique; Enlightenment’s dialectal turn

*“Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”*¹²⁴

In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer sought to create a critical theory, one of the purposes of which was to prove how the Enlightenment as a form of critique to myth dialectically became a myth itself. In seeking freedom from nature, dogma and myth, and in order to progress the instrumental form of reason and rationality, mankind ended up with a tendency to control things, which is why instrumental reason has been coopted as a tool of domination.

What Adorno and Horkheimer “*had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.*”¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 19

¹²² Levinas, 1998, pp. 166-7

¹²³ Ibid, p. 121

¹²⁴ Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 1

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. ixv, preface of 1944 and 1947

The critique they offer throughout the book is that the Enlightenment, the progress in thinking and scientific revolution that it sought to bring, did not only have emancipatory effects. Enlightenment has not prevented us from sinking into barbarism. On the contrary, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the Enlightenment is (self)-destructive. Apart from bringing scientific progress, science at some point also came to function dubiously, by which Adorno and Horkheimer mean it has let itself turn into domination. Enlightenment has not simply improved thought, but rather – intentionally or not - reduced it to a commodity. The operations and developments in modern science indicate a decline in theoretical education, which is being replaced by a positivist inclination to only strive for the accumulation of facts and the calculation of probabilities. The blocking of the theoretical imagination, they argue, has led to political delusion.¹²⁶ The problem, they seem to think, is that intellectuality, or philosophical critique has become complicit with the dominant order, and should therefore reflect on its own guilt and seek to not be complicit anymore.¹²⁷ For them, this is necessary if we are to avoid catastrophes, and if we are to prevent Enlightenment from completely destroying itself. What Adorno and Horkheimer most profoundly feared, was a return of fascism¹²⁸, shortly after the world war, and an all-encompassing economic apparatus that not only completely controls the masses through the division of labor and consumption, but also deludes them with the culture industry.

But they did not aim to reject Enlightenment in totality with their critique. Freedom in society, they noted, is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. But in the form it took when they wrote their work, Enlightened thinking, they argued *“already contains the germ of the regression that is taking place everywhere today.”* According to them, this is seen in the rise of fascism. If the Enlightenment fails to reflect on this regression, it will seal its own fate. Furthermore, it must reflect on the destructive sides of progress, and the way it is reduced to pragmatism, which has consequences for its relation to truth. Whereas Kant did not conceptualize this destructive tendency (which might also have been impossible in that specific historical moment), he thought Enlightenment would free us from domination. Adorno and Horkheimer, on the other hand, observe a *“mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism[.]”*¹²⁹ It is no coincidence that they speak of ‘technologically educated’, since they thought a mere technical education with a total lack of theoretical education, leads to political delusion. In other words, this makes people more susceptible to let themselves be seduced by despotism, in this case to fascism. What Adorno and Horkheimer thus feared, is that the masses become unthinking, unreflective and uncritical. For them the value of thinking is therefore of great importance, also expressed in all the passages where they emphasize the importance of a free form of philosophy that is not part of the division of labor of the same scientific departments that serve the economic apparatus. Furthermore, this is also why they emphasize the importance of autonomous art that does not serve the culture industry, which – as we will see below – only deludes the masses in their leisure time, making them even more compliant to the economic apparatus. The fact Adorno and Horkheimer speak so many times of masses, is also exactly because the individual is nullified by being fully absorbed in the economic apparatus. For Adorno and Horkheimer, critique thus is increasingly impeded by the hegemonic apparatus.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. xv-i

¹²⁷ Ibid, pp. xiv-xv

¹²⁸ Ibid, pp. 138-42

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. xvi

Here they seem to be not so far removed from Kant, since they believe the ability to philosophize and theorize should be something an individual can freely do in sovereignty.

The enslavement to the economic apparatus they believe to have exposed, can be traced back to social progress. This progress also consists in the increase of economic productivity. This is only logical, since in order to be more economically productive, the division of labor and the masses that serve the economic system have to increasingly be made economically utilizable. This form of critique is also relevant for us today, since often progress is coined in terms of economic growth and increases in productivity. For Adorno and Horkheimer this does not unproblematically lead to inclusive progress. On the contrary, it can lead to the more effective enslavement of people to the economy and to more social injustice and deprivation of the poor, who evidently not always benefit from economic growth. Indeed, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, while the increase in economic productivity led to the conditions for a more just world, it has also provided the technical apparatus and the social groups that control it “*a disproportionate advantage over the rest of the population.*” Notwithstanding the fact that individuals are better provided for than ever before by the economic apparatus, individuals still vanish before the economic apparatus they serve. These processes even strengthen each other reciprocally: “*the powerlessness and pliability of the masses increase with the quantity of goods allocated to them.*” Because intellect as such comes to serve the economic apparatus and order, its task should be to negate this reification. Intellect is therefore now “*solidified into a cultural asset and handed out for consumption purposes.*” The precise information and amusements that follow “*make people smarter and more stupid at once.*”¹³⁰ The culture and consumer industry serves as an ideological curtain, behind which Adorno and Horkheimer see real doom gathering. Again, in other words, the intellectual capacities of individuals are undermined and prevented to grow, as they are taken hostage by both the economic apparatus that forces them to comply with the division of labor, as it is by the culture industry that distracts the intellect to such an extent, that no new ideas will ever be formed, no alternatives to the economic hegemony ever imagined. This of course only makes people more susceptible to claims that ‘there is no alternative’.

Although they were critical to social progress, their goal with their critique, was “*not [to] call a halt before progress itself, [which] requires us to take up the cause of the remnants of freedom, of tendencies toward real humanity, even though they seem powerless in face of the great historical trend.*”¹³¹ In other words, they hoped to contribute to alleviating powerlessness in the face of the economic apparatus and technological progress, and to give individuals some power back to steer history in a direction that not only serves the economic apparatus. So to some extent, it could be argued they sought to save the Enlightenment by releasing it from the clutches of the forces of domination.

The aim of Enlightenment was to liberate humankind from fear (from myths, gods and the like) and install them as masters by using knowledge as a means to power. In their work Adorno and Horkheimer especially refer to Francis Bacon. The mind, for Bacon, has been administered with the task to conquer superstition, fantasy and dogma. Ultimately, Bacon believed, knowledge could help us control external, but also internal (human) nature. Knowledge, as a result, came to have no limits in its enslavement. As we saw above with Foucault, the enlightened form of thinking was also utilized to not only control nature, but also to discipline human beings. Power now sought to control human beings in such a way to

¹³⁰Ibid, p. xviii

¹³¹ Ibid, pp. xi-xii

make them docile, in the sense that it aimed to create politically loyal and economically productive bodies. Since indeed we see that within the economic apparatus some hold a disproportionate advantage over others, it was the bourgeois that sought to steer this development to their advantage. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the enlightened, calculating form of knowing thus came to serve the bourgeois in the economy; *“it is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins.”* Again, technology lies at the heart of this form of knowledge, according to Adorno and Horkheimer. What it sets out to produce is method and means to exploit the labor of the masses and increase capital. It does not produce concepts, images, or the joy of understanding anymore. Faculties that are crucial for developing critical, philosophical thinking, understanding and imagination are consequently annulled, making people increasingly unable to imagine alternative ways of thinking, acting, feeling and imagining. Thus, since Bacon, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, knowledge became an instrument for the attainment of utilities for mankind. This, then, is the birth of instrumental reason and rationality. The only thing human beings now wish to learn from nature is *“how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings.”*¹³²

The factual mentality Enlightenment lies in, has a triumphant nature, it seeks to triumph over nature and human beings in using knowledge as a tool for power.¹³³ Another result of this mentality is that modern science is only focused on formulas, rules and probabilities. For enlightenment, everything must conform to the standard of calculability and utility. Everything else is suspiciously discarded. A dire consequence for critique is that any intellectual resistance only increases its strength. There is no more place for meaning, concepts or causation.¹³⁴ Defining things like substance, quality, activity and suffering, being and existence are now things science does not concern itself with.¹³⁵

Above we saw that critique also concerns itself with creating awareness about suffering, criticizing the causes thereof when they lie in social injustice or preventable catastrophes and then conceptualizing ways to alleviate this suffering. When indeed suffering is of no concern anymore, or worse, seen as a means to achieve socio-economic progress, it will become hard to criticize the techniques of power that set this in motion.

Another tendency within enlightened thinking is that it seeks to encompass everything as a unity and to find a system from which everything and anything follows. This is especially shown by the scientific mindset that the Enlightenment brought forth. This mindset reduces the multiplicity of forms *“to position and arrangement, history to fact, things to matter.”*¹³⁶ This is exactly the myth that Adorno and Horkheimer seek to expose: the assumption that everything can be resolved and explained in numbers is as mythical as the myths the Enlightenment sought to destroy.¹³⁷ This myth came into existence with the invention of statistics. It was then that many scholars became increasingly enthusiastic and optimistic about the proclaimed ability to calculate everything through statistical correlations. Since this also led to an even larger tendency of enlightened thinking to not only predict, but also control reality by probability calculations, the number became a tool of control. By bringing everything under the header of calculability and predictability with the inclination to control and manipulate the possibilities statistically, everything becomes a substrate of domination.

¹³² Ibid, p. 2

¹³³ Ibid

¹³⁴ Ibid

¹³⁵ Ibid, pp. 2-3

¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 4

¹³⁷ Ibid, pp. 4-5

As such, enlightened reason sought to enslave everything it could calculate and predict.¹³⁸

This also led to a reduction in differences, all the affinities that exist between things, science supplants “*by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and its accidental bearer*”¹³⁹ This bearer, for them, was the number, which thus became Enlightenment’s canon. Since statistical reason claimed to be able to get to know everything that is worth knowing and that it is able to utilize any resulting knowledge for the benefit of humanity, it claims that: “*all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self-preservation through adaptation – this barren wisdom merely reproduces the fantastic doctrine it rejects: the sanction of fate which through retribution, incessantly reinstates what always was.*”¹⁴⁰ Again, Adorno and Horkheimer emphasize, everything different in this thinking is made same and as such sets up the boundaries to possible experience. As we saw with Foucault, power sets constraints regarding what can be said, done, felt and thought, which is why boundaries to *possible* experience are such an impediment to critique. Every existing thing is related to every other. With this move, Enlightenment amputates everything that is incommensurable, leading to not only the dissolving of qualities in thought, but also forces human beings to conformity.¹⁴¹

Here we can see Adorno and Horkheimer again emphasizing that the reduction in thought, this time in terms of its qualities, is conducive to increasing the conformity of the people, in other words, to them becoming ever more uncritical.

Adorno and Horkheimer extrapolate this critique to the market, since enlightened knowledge is also utilized to make the economy more effective by enhancing productivity and by making its mechanisms increasingly rational and specialized. Since the market does nothing other than to find able bodies to serve its purpose of continuous growth, it does not concern itself where humans are born, the possibilities they see are determined in such a way that everyone is “*molded to fit the production of goods that can be bought on the market. The ‘self’ human beings are endowed with is at the same time made different from all the others, but also more the same.*” In other words, we might say, since specialization requires some individuality regarding skills and intelligence, it makes people different from others in accordance to the function that is required of them within a specialized segment of the economy. They are on the other hand also made same in the sense that the ultimate goal is universal: to increase the productivity and efficiency of the labor force and to align people to the economic apparatus for this exact purpose. Enlightenment thus always ensued social coercion. The collective is manipulated as a unity, thereby negating individuality, but at the same time producing individuals. Since indeed the bourgeois have disproportionate amounts of wealth and thus control over the rest of the population, what dominates the social order is the basis of fixed property.¹⁴² This of course resonates with what we saw above concerning Foucault: the goal of (disciplinary) power is to create politically loyal and economically productive bodies.

Unlike Kant believed, the unstoppable movement and progression of thought does not liberate and emancipate us, but becomes a means in our subordination. Science, in this

¹³⁸Ibid, p. 6

¹³⁹Ibid, p. 7

¹⁴⁰Ibid, p. 8 and cf. Levinas

¹⁴¹Ibid, p. 9

¹⁴²Ibid

movement, is complicit to this subordination, Kant's optimism about scientific progress notwithstanding. Deductive science, Adorno and Horkheimer argue – which is inherent in logics as well - mirrors hierarchy and compulsion.¹⁴³ Power manifests itself socially on the division of labor and attempts to dominate the entire workforce wholly. The workforce, subsequently, becomes a means for serving particular interests. Ultimately, enlightenment led to an irrational belief in rational organization.¹⁴⁴

Another intellectual consequence of enlightenment comes from reifying thought “*as an autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it itself produced, so that it can finally be replaced by the machine.*” It thus casted aside philosophy's demand to “*think thinking*”. Thought has instead become a thing, a tool to use. Thought must now serve the manipulation of the actual; such is the characteristic of the scientific temper. It is here Adorno and Horkheimer criticize Kant. Kant, they argue, “*combined the doctrine of thought's restlessly toilsome progress toward infinity with insistence on its inefficiency and eternal limitation.*” The world domination that ensued from enlightenment ultimately paradoxically turns against the thinking subject itself, whilst it tried to free itself through thinking.¹⁴⁵

Adorno and Horkheimer again bring the social consequences of such thought under our attention. All facts science proclaims to discover are seen as immune to intervention, even when social injustices arise therefrom. While Kant believed science would be conducive to the attainment of human ends, in such a way that we would enter a more humane, rational and free world and would only increase knowledge, it now makes itself immune to intervention and contributes to social injustice. In being dominated, human beings become estranged from the dominated objects, and the relationships between humans and the relationships to themselves are permeated by the objectification of mind. Subsequently, they succumb under the modes of operation that are objectively expected of them. The reification that follows is that “*the economic apparatus endows commodities with the values which decide the behavior of people.*” More generally, all the “*agencies of mass production and its culture impress standardized behavior on the individual as the only natural, decent, and rational one.*”¹⁴⁶ This has led individuals to define themselves as things and statistical elements, as either a success or a failure. Success or failure are here understood as being able or unable to adapt to the objectivity of their function and serve their assigned schemata. This is wherein self-preservation lies in the type of society Adorno and Horkheimer subjugate to critique.¹⁴⁷

The focus on self-preservation, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, is summarized in Spinoza's proposition that “*the endeavor of preserving oneself is the first and only basis of virtue*”.¹⁴⁸ This has become the dominant maxim that characterizes the whole of Western civilization. Again, this can be seen in the socio-economic domain. All individuals now do is attempt to increase capital, or gain strength for extra work. This leads people to self-alienate, because they have to mold themselves to the technical apparatus that serves the economy. Enlightenment has as such led to the abolishment of subjectivity by automated machinery, which function better when subjectivity has been eliminated. It is positivism Adorno and Horkheimer target here, because it has eliminated thought itself, thereby eliminating “*the last intervening agency between individual action and the social norm.*” Reason, which Kant and

¹⁴³Ibid, p. 16

¹⁴⁴Ibid, p. 15

¹⁴⁵Ibid, pp. 19-20

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 21

¹⁴⁷Ibid, 20-1

¹⁴⁸Spinoza, in Adorno & Horkheimer, 2007, p. 22

later Hegel thought would lead us to freedom, has instead become “*an aid to the all-encompassing economic apparatus.*”¹⁴⁹ The ambition to make reason an instrument of purposes, now finds its success. Whereas Kant hoped the self would be freed through reason, the self is now entirely encompassed by the way civilization is run by instrumental reason. The automation of self-preservation by the economy, has even led controllers of production to dismiss reason.¹⁵⁰

The nullification of subjectivity is also seen in the fact that everyone is denied happiness; distraction from work must serve the effectivity of work itself. This means that when people are excluded from work, this will lead to even more suffering.¹⁵¹ In the domain of work, all instincts are fixated on serving the economic apparatus, however differentiated the skills and knowledge of humanity have become. Mind has now become a mere instrument of power. It mediates the social reality in such a way that it moderates the immediacy of the economic justice that has ensued from the conditions of work in society. The more the complex and sensitive the social, economic, and scientific mechanisms become, the more impoverished the experiences of those that serve them. And the more people adapt to the power of progress, the more power will progress. At some point, Adorno and Horkheimer predict, this will lead to a regression.¹⁵²

The regression, or calamity will consist in being driven to a catastrophe not only by the objective laws of the market, but through conscious decisions of company chairmen. They succeed in dominating social reality by training the population to guard the system and serve the objectives of administration. The population will keep accepting this development and will find it necessary with each increase in their standard of living. This is why poverty is the antithesis between power and impotence. Poverty, already at the time of writing of the *Dialectic*, was continuously growing, “*together with the capacity to permanently abolish poverty.*” The status quo that has resulted, is impenetrable to each individual. Above all, humanity cannot escape this situation as long as thinking is still an instrument of power.¹⁵³

Adorno and Horkheimer are also critical towards assumed advances in civilization. Each time civilization renews its mastery, and although the means to alleviate suffering have increased, this has not led to a decrease in suffering.¹⁵⁴

Enlightenment forfeited its own realization by sacrificing thought to mathematics, machinery and organization. The only potential for overturning the status quo, will lie in “*theory’s refusal to yield to the oblivion in which society allows thought to ossify.*” To succeed in this, knowledge must now not serve to amass power, but strive to dissolve it.¹⁵⁵

Adorno and Horkheimer trace the instrumentalization of Reason by the Enlightenment back to Kant. When defining what reason is and ought to be, Kant argued that the mind should combine its individual cognitions into a system of internal logic. Reason should come to understand itself and find its effective application. The activities of understanding should adhere to a unity in its system. This must lead to a systematization of knowledge by letting its parts conform to a single principle. This unifying function became Enlightenment’s goal. The schemata Kant proposed in attaining this unity, have also become the deliberate task of

¹⁴⁹Adorno & Horkheimer, 2007, p. 23

¹⁵⁰Ibid, pp. 24-5

¹⁵¹Ibid, p. 27

¹⁵²Ibid, p. 29

¹⁵³Ibid, pp. 30-1

¹⁵⁴Ibid, p. 32

¹⁵⁵Ibid, pp. 33-4

science. All impressions must conform to a corresponding concept, which are hierarchically ordered within the structures of the mind as Kant saw them. This system, that ensued from enlightenment, led to an instrumental rationality that aims for *“the form of knowledge which most ably deals with the facts, most effectively assists the subject in mastering nature.”* Calculating thought puts all its trust in science, with brutal social efficiency as a result. By standardizing reason through this conceptualization, reason has come to operate under the pressure of purposes and as systematic science. Enlightenment, as a result, *“is the philosophy which equates truth with the scientific system.”* This is exactly what Kant aimed at, which led to thought losing its own significance, because science is merely a technical operation, and does not reflect on itself, nor is it able to. The consequence for social operations is that they have since been classified and bent to the purpose of creating useful and successful members of professional and national groups.¹⁵⁶

Mass society, consequently, reproduces itself through use of science and the way it serves the socio-economic order. Individuals that are part of this order, because of the focus on self-preservation, are forced to fend for themselves.¹⁵⁷

Politically, Enlightenment has aligned itself to liberalism. With its focus on individualism, self-preservation has been given free rein in the free economy, determining the maxims for action. The market economy that has been unleashed by enlightenment now contains the prevailing form of reason.¹⁵⁸ Vice versa, the formalization of reason can be seen as *“the intellectual expression of mechanized production.”*¹⁵⁹ Domination has become an end in itself, *“in the form of economic power.”*¹⁶⁰ The economic system and apparatus this resulted in, has led to a division between human beings in private groups.¹⁶¹

For Adorno and Horkheimer, this has consequences for individual subjectivity and morality as well. According to them, sobriety, respect for facts and humbleness towards its own dreams are typical for individuals in the type of society they criticize.¹⁶² Individuals solely adhere to reason and its commands, thereby creating emotional apathy, which Kant deemed necessary as presupposition to virtue. Enthusiasm must be curbed by reason, as well as spontaneity. Stoicism, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, is thus the bourgeois philosophy par excellence, expressed in bourgeois coldness.¹⁶³ Because all pleasure is social, and because human beings are now alienated, pleasure stems from alienation. This means that the only way to real pleasure is when one is free from the compulsion to work, free from the social function one is endowed with by the dominant order.¹⁶⁴

Within the 21st century, pleasure now is also mediated through social media, and increasingly pleasures can be consumed online, through media such YouTube videos, Netflix and the like. Now, our pleasures can be consumed in even more isolation, where we only online connect with others, through ‘sharing’ and ‘liking’. The bourgeois coldness is now replaced by a ‘like-culture’, where there seems to be almost a moral and political obligation to be positive and joyful. Enthusiasm is thus not curbed anymore, but exploited. Capitalism now

¹⁵⁶Ibid, pp. 65-7

¹⁵⁷Ibid, pp.68-9

¹⁵⁸Ibid

¹⁵⁹Ibid, pp. 81-2

¹⁶⁰Ibid, p. 82

¹⁶¹Ibid, pp. 70-1

¹⁶²Ibid, pp. 44-5

¹⁶³Ibid, pp. 75-6 & p. 80

¹⁶⁴Ibid

thrives on the things that make us enthusiastic. Now we are made to adhere not so much to only our reason, but also our emotions, since they are very profitable in the 21st century. This for instance means television is not telling us what to think anymore, but how to feel. Of course, for productive and achievement purposes we are still prompted to act rational, but when it comes to consumption, we are seduced to show and let loose all our emotions. And of course television is increasingly replaced by other media that allows us precisely to show and exhibit our emotions. Indeed, when articles or other shared items appear on Facebook, one can now not only write a response, but also place an emoticon that either expresses our anger, sadness, enthusiasm or amazement. As a consequence, the culture industry has more platforms to manifest itself on. We will look into these matters more elaborately below with Byung Chul Han.

In order to control the leisure time of people, the culture industry seeks to perpetuate the obedience of consumers to the economic apparatus. The goal of the culture industry is that it must orient consumers according to the unity of production in their leisure time. The Kantian schematism, according to which the psyche has a certain mechanism that can fit data into the system of pure reason has now been appropriated by the culture industry. The operations of the schemata are used as basis to classify the consumer, to make products fit its psyche. All that follows, are ready-made clichés that are defined by the purpose they serve within the schemata.¹⁶⁵ A result from this is that the imagination and spontaneity within consumer culture are diminishing. The products the culture industry provides “*can be alertly consumed even in a state of distraction.*”¹⁶⁶ Only what is industrialized is allowed, which subordinates all branches of intellectual production and is meant to imprint the work routine.¹⁶⁷ In the 21st century, with digital social media, these developments are perpetuated further. With tailored advertisements and filter bubbles, consumers are classified all the more elaborately, and steered towards production and consumption ever more effectively. Our state of distraction has also significantly increased with the internet and other 21st century media. We are now a generation that is ‘too wired to focus’, thereby even further annulling creative thinking and imagination. We are now in a continuous state of consumption, since companies like Google, Facebook and other companies profit from almost any activity undertaken online. Every moment we are awake, our attention is something that could be altered and steered in such a way to profit from it. This is why some have argued that the only means of resistance there is nowadays to the 24/7 economy is to sleep.¹⁶⁸ You want to be critical? Take a nap!

We see also here the start of psychopolitics at work. The culture industry leaves the body free and seeks instead to manipulate the soul. People that do not conform, are condemned to economic impotence and intellectual powerlessness. Indeed, when disconnected from the mainstream, one is easily convicted of inadequacy.¹⁶⁹

The culture industry has thus become a means of control, fully appropriated to capitalist modes of production. The underlying morality expressed by the culture industry is the myth of success, to which the defrauded masses increasingly cling. As a result, there is an ideological

¹⁶⁵Ibid, p. 98

¹⁶⁶Ibid, pp. 100-1

¹⁶⁷Ibid, p. 104

¹⁶⁸ See for instance: <http://athensbiennale.org/event-as-process/sleeping-as-an-act-of-non-cooperation/> and: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/22/24-7-late-capitalism-ends-sleep-jonathan-crary-review> In the latter article it is argued that neoliberal economy even attempts to bring us in a continuous state of wokeness.

¹⁶⁹Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 106

truce between producers and consumers, both, with a good conscience are content with the reproduction of sameness. Everything new is excluded.¹⁷⁰ This of course, is reflected in our achievers society today, where success is idolized and failure is seen as the lowest point one can sink to. As we will see with Han, in our achievement-society, the myth of success permeates society even more than at the time of Adorno and Horkheimer's writing.

The culture industry, in order to succeed in capturing the continuous attention of its consumers, has a high tempo and dynamism. Everything must be in ceaseless motion and nothing is allowed to stay as it was. The goal is to control consumers with entertainment.¹⁷¹

According to Bernard Stiegler, our technological milieu to a large extent controls our individuation and thus also our desires. In a similar vein he argues that the high tempo and dynamism are typical for 20th and 21st century media and technologies. Within our hyperindustrialised society, he argues, images, advertisements, video and the like (which he calls temporal objects, since they do not exist in a stable form) are continuously bombarded at us in order to steer our attention towards consumption. According to him, our mind is fragile amidst these and other technological developments, leading to an ecological crisis of the mind. This is why Stiegler seeks to save our mind with his *Ars Industrialis*, an industrialism of the mind.¹⁷²

The culture industry fabricates needs; and the entertainment it produces is nothing other than the prolongation of work. The entertainment is namely "*sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again.*" The mechanical power exerted over leisure and happiness, "*determines so thoroughly the fabrication of entertainment commodities, that the off-duty worker can experience nothing but after-images of the work process itself.*" So the only escape from work is through adaptation to it in leisure time. The amusement the culture industry provides inevitably leads to boredom, because the amusement must cost no effort, no thoughts of the spectator himself are needed, nor are new thoughts stimulated. Mental capacity is only diminishing under the influence of entertainment for the culture industry only accepts meaninglessness.¹⁷³ This is something that is brilliantly criticized in the book and movie that go by the same name: *Fight Club*.¹⁷⁴ Here we see a protagonist that is the archetype of mass consumer culture and work: a (self)alienated, dehumanized, lonely and bored office worker who is but a small cog in the division of labor in the company he works for. He works at an office for an insurance company, making profits for his executives. The furniture at the office he works in is as neatly ordered, furnished and equipped as the apartment he lives in by indistinguishable commodity items. His behavior at home, his consumptions and entertainment mirrors the work he does: it is predictable, structured and adhering to strict routines and efficiency. The items he buys to manicure his apartment are the same that can be found at his office and in every other office and apartment. Since consuming these commodities never actually leads to any new experience or feeling (the protagonist in the beginning of the movie does not even feel anything at all), the movie shows the monotony of consumer capitalism and culture that also Adorno and Horkheimer addressed. Additionally, the rational organization of society they criticized is also constantly seen in the movie. The division of labor the protagonist is part of, is as rational as the way he

¹⁷⁰Ibid

¹⁷¹Ibid, pp. 106-8

¹⁷² Lemmens, in Leven, van Rooden, Schuilenberg & van Tuinen, 2011, pp. 298-300

¹⁷³Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 109

¹⁷⁴ The book was first published in 1992 by Vintage Publishing and adopted into a movie directed by David Fincher in 1999

furnishes his apartment with mass-produced items that come from the assembly line of Ikea. Throughout especially the first part of the movie we can see an illustration of the point Adorno and Horkheimer make about dehumanization and isolation: the protagonist is nothing but a part of the unthinking masses that they describe.

When the protagonist finally breaks free from his alienating existence, he finds himself in one violent situation after the other and creates a second personality and gets caught up in anti-corporate terrorism, that eventually does not lead to anything other than the destruction of some corporate office buildings, reminding us that in order to become part of such a movement ultimately does not lead to anything but violence and that its hard to remain sane when one gives up one's routine existence. What is perhaps worse, is that the movement he becomes part of becomes as efficient, hierarchic and dehumanizing as the mainstream life he sought to escape. The message of the narrative is quite cynical. Stay part of the workforce and consumer society, and boredom from routine and insomnia will be your fate, escape that existence, and expect not only more beatings to follow, but to become part of an organization that is even more dehumanizing and anonymous than mainstream life.¹⁷⁵

Typical of the content of entertainment according to Adorno and Horkheimer is a depiction of organized cruelty towards protagonists and antagonists alike, serving as a continuous lesson that all individual resistance will be broken, as is also seen in movies like *Fight Club*. The entertainment it thus offers does not make life any more worth living. The cynical message the culture industry brings with its maximal utilization of technical possibilities of the economic system through mass consumption goes to such an extent that it proves to be reluctant to abolish hunger.¹⁷⁶

Indeed, in many movies the protagonist in the end does not really oppose the status quo, but protects it. A more contemporary example of this is the Marvel comic book movie adaptation of *Black Panther*¹⁷⁷. Here a fictional country, Wakanda, in the heart of Africa is home to a black superhero. The civilization the movie depicts is technologically advanced and quite emancipated, since, for instance, women there have high political positions and important scientific and technological roles. When the main antagonist in the story seeks to use the advanced technology of Wakanda to emancipate the rest of the black population from oppression, exploitation, poverty and racism, albeit violently, the protagonist stops him from doing so, thereby perpetuating the status quo and seemingly implying the status quo is still better than a world where all black, postcolonial people are violently liberated. Does the protagonist only stop the antagonist due to the violent way in which the antagonist seeks

¹⁷⁵ The story is entertainingly philosophically analyzed on the YouTube channel *Wisecrack*. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cGrg2Gh4gg>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbo1eF8czfg> and: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yql6jgTUGmc>. Ironically, with Adorno and Horkheimer we might say also philosophy becomes part of the culture industry. *Wisecrack* is additionally yet another thing that in the end capitalism profits from, since it makes its earning through advertisements. In the first link the philosophy of Adorno and Horkheimer is used to analyze *Fight Club*.

¹⁷⁶ Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, pp. 110-11

¹⁷⁷ The movie was directed by Ryan Coogler and first screened in 2018. Interestingly, some argue that these type of movies serve some emancipatory purpose and have critical potential, since they depict more equal and socially advanced worlds. We will look into this more elaborately when we discuss meta-modernism. We could amongst other things ask ourselves if indeed critique has permeated pop-culture, or that it is a problem that critique has become entertainment and thus part of the culture industry and therefore profitable, since Marvel and the makers that adopt these movies earn quite some cash from bringing diversification and emancipation to the big screen. See: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2236939-norm-is-niet-meer-wit-hetero-en-man-en-daar-verdient-filmmaker-aan.html>

liberation? Or is the message indeed that the status quo is still better than any alternative?

We also again need only think of *Fight Club*, where the protagonist continuously undergoes some form of cruelty and violence: his estrangement and work, his insomnia and self-alienation. Even when he finally breaks free from his work routine, he finds no alleviation for his suffering, it is only replaced with other forms of suffering.

According to meta-modernists, these could be viewed as examples where we see the cultural logics at work in a society expressed to ‘structures of feeling’ that respond to certain shifts or developments within Western capitalist culture. The first example to them would be proof that the cynic, ironic detachment that comes with postmodernism is expressed in novels and movies. The latter example would prove there is again need for a critical, emancipatory and politically engaged narrative that succeeds the cynical and ironic structures of postmodern structures of feeling and cultural logics.¹⁷⁸ This also shows critique is morphing into something else. Since meta-modernists see also critique lurking beneath pop-culture and not only in high-culture, the choice for analyzing popular movies with a broad audience is a deliberate one. In the final chapter we will discuss meta-modernism more elaborately and try to pinpoint how exactly critique is morphing in the 21st century through structures of feeling, amongst others. We will see critique is thus not only something rational, or theoretical anymore, but also manifests itself on an emotional level.

Through the culture industry, people are reminded that they must fit the rational organization of industry, which sees human beings as nothing other than consumers and employees. As we saw, Enlightenment allied itself with liberalism, which regarded the poor as lazy, but today they are even made suspect.¹⁷⁹ This can be seen as the start of the individualization of problems such as poverty. When there are poor, it is not the system that produced them that is guilty, through the creation of superfluous people as a consequence of technological progress, but the poor themselves. The friendly care the system provides for those out of work, is only a means of increasing the production of those that fall out of line. This care is displayed as an act of compassion, yet the only goal is to make everyone function within the industrial system. This brings the last private impulse under social control. The portrayed compassionate stance serves as admittance of the suffering the system creates. Tragedy, however, is included in society’s calculations, and affirmed as necessary movement of the world. Herein the cynical appropriation of regret is shown. All suffering, namely, is deemed as necessary for progress to be made. Individuals are thus encouraged to accept the conditions of this life, which makes them fall into hopeless dependence upon the system.¹⁸⁰ Even the care of the self that Foucault urges us to take up, is co-opted by the economic apparatus. Employers executives now encourage us to take good care of ourselves, which for them only has instrumental value: they hope it will increase our productivity.¹⁸¹

The only form of individuality the culture industry allows is pseudo-individuality, individuals serve as mere intersections of the universal character of the economic apparatus and all are subjugated under the harshness of competitive society. This also led to loneliness in its wake, all individuals are left to pursue their purposes on their own.¹⁸² We need only look at the increasing rate of loneliness in the West and the increasing harshness of competitiveness

¹⁷⁸ Van den Akker, Gibbons & Vermeulen, 2017, pp. 8-11

¹⁷⁹ Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 121

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, pp. 122-3

¹⁸¹ This point is elaborately made in the book *The Wellness Syndrome* by Carl Cederström & Andre Spicer (2016). See for instance pp. 34-5, 37- & p. 59

¹⁸² Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 125

to find evidence and contemporary relevance for this claim.¹⁸³

To close this chapter, we could in summary say that Adorno and Horkheimer tried to show the self-destructive tendency of enlightened reason. They saw this as grounded in the Enlightenment's mission to dominate external and internal nature, and ultimately, society. Enlightened Reason, henceforth, became entangled with domination. Enlightenment's attempt to achieve freedom through thinking thus left dominance of another nature in its wake. The advancing rationalization of instrumental thought it brought about paradoxically led to the hollowing out of Enlightenment, leading ultimately to its own destruction. Kant hoped science would serve humankind, but due to the dialectical turn of enlightenment it has become detached from practical life. The formalized morality he proposed only led to dehumanization and the culture industry has been reverted to manipulating the masses to make them fit into the all-encompassing economic apparatus all the more smoothly.¹⁸⁴ So instead of reason leading us to more freedom, it has in its instrumentalized form become an impediment to freedom. The economic apparatus and the social order it dominates have appropriated enlightened reason for its own purposes and forces individuals to serve those purposes.

As the Enlightenment elicited critical responses to either debunk it, or to save it from its dark sides, Adorno and Horkheimer's theory not only influenced critical theory to a large extent, but also became the subject to critique itself. In the next chapter we will therefore look at the critique that Adorno and Horkheimer's theory is subjugated to and see what critique has morphed into after their Critical Theory. We will end the chapter by looking what contemporary critical relevance the theory of Adorno and Horkheimer can nonetheless have.

¹⁸³ See for instance: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)30142-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)30142-9/fulltext).

According to some this also has to do with the increase in digital connectivity, see:

<http://theconversation.com/how-the-digitalisation-of-everything-is-making-us-more-lonely-90870>

¹⁸⁴Ibid, pp. 217-8

Chapter II From Enlightenment to Cynical Reason¹⁸⁵

In this chapter we will look at the limits of the theory of Adorno and Horkheimer and also look back on their own positive evaluation and attempt to save the Enlightenment. We will in particular look at Peter Sloterdijk's theory on cynicism and his conception of Enlightenment. In the next paragraph, we will look at one other reason why a critical theory based on whatever conception of enlightenment is problematic, namely due to its Eurocentric nature and colonial background, to provide yet another example of the limits of traditional Critical Theory. In this way, in this chapter we will also show how critique has undergone another transformation and in what it morphed into after the limits some aspects of critical theory has run into. In the final paragraph we will look at what aspects of Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theory still have contemporary relevance, especially as a theory that shows us the importance of critique's function to prevent catastrophes.

II.I The limits of Critical Theory and its culmination in cynicism

Adorno and Horkheimer aimed at creating a critical theory, which they hoped would subvert certain dominating trends within the socio-economic system and the alienating, distracting effects of the culture industry. The critical thought of Adorno and Horkheimer had profound influence due to its insightful theories about administration within society, the culture industry and the appropriation of science and technology by dominating forces and the consumer society. More broadly, their critique on socio-economic developments of the time were timely and revealed the dominating tendencies of the socio-economic apparatus.¹⁸⁶ There are, however, limits to their theory, which we will look into in this chapter.

First of all, the weakness of the *Dialectic* lies in its totalizing methods and autonomous theoretical ideals. The first question Peter Sloterdijk poses in this regard is if it is indeed correct to argue that all science and enlightened rationality leads to social domination. If that's true, then what status does the theory of the *Dialectic* have? The same could be said about their critique towards the culture industry. Seeing it only as a means of control, they might neglect oppositional moments within popular culture. This has significant consequences for the critical potential of their theory, because if they are right that their theoretical critique is formulated from a position of intellectual isolation against the mindless conformity to capitalist modernity of the masses, they neglect the practical critique of other movements, like minorities, women or other marginalized people. And if indeed the masses are as unthinking as they proclaim, then how can they emancipate themselves? And how can a critical theory help them if they are too embedded within the economic apparatus and too distracted and deluded by the culture industry to be receptive to that same critical theory?¹⁸⁷

However their influence, the potential of the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer was not enough to emancipate the oppressed, nor to overthrow the hegemony they sought to criticize. Nor did they succeed in saving the progressive sides of the Enlightenment. For this reason, we have entered a state of cynicism, according to Sloterdijk. Sloterdijk sought to expose that the unfulfilled promises of the Enlightenment and the critical theory posed by the *Dialectic* led to a collective cynical consciousness, expressed in a pessimistic paralysis. The optimistic progressive beliefs of human emancipation of the Enlightenment, - and in lesser

¹⁸⁵Many of the arguments made here can also be found in my bachelor thesis (2017), which can be viewed and downloaded from URL: <https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/36921>

¹⁸⁶Goldstein, 1992, p. 185

¹⁸⁷Ibid, p. 187

form of Adorno and Horkheimer, were consequently disintegrated by this cynicism. Typical of this cynicism is that the collective (especially the informed part) is duly aware of wrong, hegemonic and dominating aspects of society and its power-structures, but has either learned to agree with them, or to see the hegemonic forces as unshakable. This means people know there is the possibility and potential to unmask hegemonies as domination or injustice and to reveal false consciousness (and as such are enlightened), but they see every ideal that is offered in replacement of those hegemonies as wishful thinking or naïve. This is what Sloterdijk came to call ‘enlightened false consciousness’, to which cynicism amounts. Any optimism about the future has thus been replaced by cynicism.¹⁸⁸

According to Sloterdijk, there is also cynicism inherent in the critical theory of the *Dialectic* itself, due to its totalizing theorizing about society and by portraying the oppressed as basically mindless conformists of capitalism, consumer society and the bourgeois ethics. If we look at other works of Adorno and Horkheimer in postscripts or autobiographical work, we see that they themselves seemed to have lost hope for the progressive and emancipatory potential of their own theory. As we have seen, they set out to create a historical, psychological and philosophical critical theory that would expose the dominating aspects of the socio-economic order, the culture industry and its appropriation of Enlightened Reason. Despite their lack of belief in the potential of their theory, they still did not wish to abandon or destroy Enlightenment altogether, as they said: “*the rescue of the Enlightenment is our concern.*”¹⁸⁹ Even though they feared for the appropriation of science by hegemonic forces, they still believed in the enlightening potential of science.

By saving Enlightenment from its (self)destructive tendencies and using philosophical thinking for progressive goals, they strived for “*the abolition of individual suffering and social injustice.*”¹⁹⁰ Adorno had the complementary wish to “*eliminate all material poverty*” for its existence in a technologically advanced world he saw as indefensible.¹⁹¹ Where first Adorno and Horkheimer had the confidence that this was possible by saving the progressive philosophical and political ideas of the Enlightenment, they later seemed to “*hope for little more than to preserve the memory of those ideas in the vortex of an overwhelming progress of disintegration.*”¹⁹² Especially Horkheimer came to note that the linkage between critical theory and political action became ever weaker. Because of the dubious purpose of all science, including their own theory, the status of Critical Theory “*as an immanent critique of traditional theory is thus also called increasingly into question.*”¹⁹³ Horkheimer himself lost more and more hope to abolish domination by concrete social movements.¹⁹⁴ From this we might conclude that their critical theory, but also Enlightenment’s mission is doomed to fail if critique does not learn from this. This means critique has to take another form, or in other words should morph into something else if it has to have any potential for averting catastrophes and ending social injustice and poverty. Cynicism therefore already seems to be inherent in one of the first and most important critical theories.

Sloterdijk argues Horkheimer’s hope has been rightly lost, since instrumental rationality and its capacities have only increased, leading to even more effective means of oppression.

¹⁸⁸Boland, 2014, p. 119

¹⁸⁹Adorno & Horkheimer, 2007, p. 241

¹⁹⁰Ibid, p. 225

¹⁹¹Ibid, p. 241

¹⁹²Ibid

¹⁹³Ibid, p. 227, Editor’s Afterword

¹⁹⁴Ibid, p. 229, Editor’s Afterword

The great historical attempt for progress has not led to the abolition of poverty, as Adorno hoped, but only has seen an ever growing gap between islands of wealth and expanding deserts for the poor.¹⁹⁵ More generally, instrumental reason is still hegemonic and has led to a cynicism of means. Every means is deemed justified in the attempted attainment of whatever form of ‘progress’ or ideal. Due to individualism, individuals themselves have coopted this form of instrumental reason, meaning it has come to be an instrument for the attainment for egoistic goals. Individual goals are so much in conflict with each other, that it is impossible to subsume them under a form of generality, thereby excluding the possibility of a Kantian realm of ends.¹⁹⁶

Another problematic result of Enlightenment, according to Sloterdijk, is that it led to what he calls ‘historical narcissism’. In our enlightened attempt to build ‘a house of man’ - and the techno-scientific mobilization that was utilized to do so – has led to the reduction of planet Earth to a resource to be exploited by humankind. The Earth has become our stage to enact our self-realization drama upon, in our quest for science and human rights.¹⁹⁷ Every belief in progress, is now dependent on a *kinetic utopia*, it is only aimed at increasing the above mentioned mobility. We have thereby set things in motion that are now beyond the domain of our control, leading to unforeseen and unforeseeable catastrophes.¹⁹⁸ This of course has dire consequences for critique, for how are we then to steer this motion in the right direction?

Of course Critical Theory did not stop with Adorno and Horkheimer. One of its most influential contemporary proponents is Jürgen Habermas. Like Adorno and Horkheimer before him, Habermas also attempts to revitalize Enlightenment. Habermas sees Enlightenment’s mission for humanism, progress and emancipation as worth saving. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, he is aware of the dangerous sides of Enlightenment. These stark sides, he shows, led to something he calls *systemworld*, a domain that is the result of instrumental reason and rationalization processes where only strategic and one-sided instrumental-rational acting is dominant. The economic apparatus, is something that Habermas would call a *systemworld*, for instance. This world is controlled by power, media and money. Calculating reason and pragmatic action are what define it. For this reason Habermas seeks to undertake a critical emancipatory attempt to conceptualize and realize an autonomous *lifeworld*. This is a domain that is not controlled by the causalities of the *systemworld*. Instead of strategic acting, here communicative acting takes a central place. Habermas sees this as a power-free domain where people can hold a dialogue with each other and where people can critically test each other’s claims in terms of their validity. According to Habermas, this leads to a form of intersubjectivity where people can reach agreement over important values, social justice, and political and democratic decision-making. Within communicative acting Habermas sees Enlightenment values like freedom, equality and empowerment at work. Hopeful as this sounds, Sloterdijk believes also the lifeworld is entirely usurped by the *systemworld*. This does make Sloterdijk himself susceptible to the argument he is making here. If the lifeworld is entirely usurped by the systemworld, then from whence does his own insight come from? The influence of money, power and language has neutralized communicative acting. Additionally, since postmodernism it is impossible to find legitimacy for knowledge, power and art. There is an unbridgeable form of dissensus,

¹⁹⁵Sloterdijk, 1989, p. 253

¹⁹⁶Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 646

¹⁹⁷Sloterdijk, 1989, pp. 236-7, 239 & 252

¹⁹⁸Ibid, pp. 21-4 & 46

according to Sloterdijk, making a critical distinction between knowing and power impossible, as we have also of course seen with Foucault. What is worse, Sloterdijk argues, since every communicative acting theory is based on some notion of progress, this only further contributes to the mobilization drive and our *kinetic utopia* that has made the techno-scientific developments spin out of control, as we saw above with *Eurotaoism*. Sloterdijk concludes this makes critique impossible as well.¹⁹⁹

Sloterdijk also criticizes Habermas' conception of history as a social-cultural learning process, where not only techno-scientific, but also political-moral progress is made. A left-*Hegelian aufhebung* as result of a historical-dialectic learning process that is alleged to culminate in a rational form of critical sensibility Sloterdijk claims to be impossible. For him this cannot serve as a normative foundation. Even the (inter)subjective reason Habermas proposes, cannot be brought under a generality due to the chaos of individual, contradicting demands that are the result of individualism, as a result of which people only make egotistical calculations. Aiming for consensus or intersubjective rationality through communicative acting is therefore unachievable. The universality Enlightenment and Habermas are aimed at, are thus unattainable.²⁰⁰

Sloterdijk claims that the belief in historical learning processes is easily undermined when we look at the bitter attitude that follows when we look back on various catastrophes like world wars and unfulfilled false ideals. The cynical consciousness that follows, does not believe in progress, but only fears the worst reproduction of the darkest episodes of history. Humanity now fears to be the architect of its own destruction more than it fosters any hope for the future.²⁰¹

And yet, also Sloterdijk, like Adorno and Horkheimer, looks for possibilities to save the Enlightenment. Referring back to Kant, Sloterdijk argues cynicism has thrown us back into tutelage, this time not due to a lack of courage, but lack of hope.²⁰² Against the background of impeding and potential catastrophes, Sloterdijk argues, we need the courage to think no less than in Kant's time. We must use reason creatively and adequately to make more of these tendencies, in terms of reasonable goals.²⁰³ Although Critical Theory has failed to emancipate humanity from slavery and tutelage, and thereby to save the Enlightenment from its negative tendencies, Sloterdijk does not deny he is yet aiming to save Critical Theory from this dire situation.²⁰⁴ Like Adorno, Sloterdijk sought to make Enlightenment a reconciling and non-violent undertaking. Conclusively, Sloterdijk also still tries to find some positive relation to the Enlightenment, and Critical Theory.

II.II Enlightenment, Critical Theory and (post)colonialism

Another problem of Enlightenment and Critical Theory, as argued by for instance Amy Allen, is that they are married to an imperialistic meta-narrative, and thereby allied with power-structures. According to Allen, a critical theory cannot be critical if it is Eurocentric and bases its history and epistemic and normative grounds on a colonial past.²⁰⁵ The European Enlightenment, Allen argues, has many dark sides. The civilizing mission of the West and the

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, pp. 33-7

²⁰⁰ Ibid, p.654

²⁰¹ Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 658-59

²⁰² Ibid, p. 23

²⁰³ Ibid

²⁰⁴ van Tuinen, 2004, p. 33

²⁰⁵ Allen, 2016, p. 4

colonialism that ensued used Enlightenment ideals and conceptions of Reason and man to legitimize this mission. According to her, this can be traced back to Kant's conception of the autonomous and rational subject, which he saw as unique for the West and distinctive with regard to the rest of the world. More generally, the ideological justification of progress has its roots in this way of thinking. Progress and the modern identity, therefore, do not stand on their own, and are not just products of the West in isolation. Rather, they are partially dependent on their interaction with the non-West. This holds especially true in material sense, according to Allen, because capitalism (which as we have seen Enlightenment has allied itself with, along with a liberal political ideal) was made possible with the extraction of natural resources and exploitation of colonial others. This dependency is also ideological in nature: the European identity – and also Kant's perception thereof – stems from a comparison and ensuing feeling of superiority regarding colonial others. Even the modern idea of freedom must be seen against this background.²⁰⁶ Until this day, this way of thinking makes imperialism and neo-colonialism possible, seen in our current economic, juridical and political order. Progress and oppression, Allen thus argues, go hand in hand.²⁰⁷ Every ideological justification and rationalization of contemporary forms of neo-colonialism, racism and imperialism must be understood against this historical background.²⁰⁸

For Allen, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt Schule as a whole is tied with colonial, enlightened history. She shows this is also the case with the most important contemporary proponents of this theory, namely Jürgen Habermas, and Axel Honneth - two critical thinkers we have not yet discussed. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, they have a more positive evaluation of Enlightenment. Although in their work they show themselves aware of the starker sides of Enlightenment that Adorno and Horkheimer pointed out, Allen shows their theories are still founded upon a certain reading of history as a Western social-cultural learning process, which for them makes something like social evolution possible. With Habermas, communicative acting and intersubjectivity regarding our epistemology and normativity are the result of this learning process, and with Honneth our struggle for recognition is likewise. This learning process is seen by them as a progressive learning process throughout history. This means that in the end Critical Theory for them has to defend a certain idea about progress. Allen argues this shows a confident belief in the classical European form of Enlightenment, with an unwillingness to recognize its darker sides described above. For Allen this also shows they believe social progress to be a fact.²⁰⁹ To her this is a Eurocentric view of progress. This is not only an aspect of the Enlightenment of Kant's time. According to her, the European conception of modernity that Habermas and Honneth adhere to, is still based on a racial construct that informs the ideological justification and rationalization of contemporary forms of imperialism, neocolonialism and racism. The notion of historical progress for Allen is too much cohesive with complex relations of domination, exclusion and the silencing of colonized and racialized subjects. According to Allen, Habermas even glorifies enlightened ideals when he validates the critical standards of his theory.²¹⁰ Since Habermas has a Western conception of communicative acting, intercultural dialogue is impossible, since 'premoderns' are not considered to be equal interlocutors. In this sense, the outcome of every dialogue is already determined by those who

²⁰⁶Ibid, pp. 16-9

²⁰⁷Ibid, p. 3

²⁰⁸Ibid, p. 16-9

²⁰⁹ Allen, 2015, p. 3 & pp. 11-2

²¹⁰ Allen, 2016, pp. 16-19 & pp. 37-9

are powerful or hegemonic in another sense, before they take place, increasing the changes of polemics instead of inclusiveness.²¹¹ Sloterdijk, in a similar vein, calls this sacrificial deception, where all sacrifices made in the name of progress must be seen as serving a social end and must be internalized to such an extent that we even forgot those sacrifices even existed.²¹² This is what erasing the dark sides of Enlightenment amounts to.

Another Eurocentric aspect of Habermas' theory, according to Allen, is that Habermas claims universality for his pragmatism and that this claim is founded on the assertion that Western communicative structures are superior to traditional ones. In this way he privileges a Western point of view. He only deems modern subjects to be communicatively competent and rational. He even sees no alternative for this view.²¹³

What undermines the credibility of Habermas' theory further, according to Allen, is that since Habermas left his radical period behind him, he at some point claimed capitalism to be something inevitable. This of course only contributes to our cynicism, as pointed out by Sloterdijk. Habermas even goes further, stating that capitalist markets and state bureaucracies are necessary aspects of social life in complex societies. The most Habermas expects and hopes for, is that the public will be critical enough to restrict the growth of capital.²¹⁴ Sloterdijk calls this a resignation in the inevitable.²¹⁵ Since it is precisely the growth of capital that causes many potential 21st century catastrophes, like growing inequality and climate change makes Habermas critical theory a highly problematic one. Especially the global growth and spread of capital perpetuates contemporary forms of domination. Those left in the periphery are excluded from the benefits of this growth.²¹⁶

For Allen, this means we must always first ask ourselves when making progress: progress for whom? Where will progress lead to? Will progress be relevant for all parties concerned? In what way? And to what extent are we careful to take care there are no negative effects of this progress? For whom should these consequences matter? This means we should be especially careful for hegemonic parties for whom progress is very beneficial, and who falsely claim it is beneficial for all.²¹⁷

Allen for this reason argues Enlightenment and Critical Theory can only have a future when they are decolonialized and freed from its imperialistic and neo-colonialist narrative. This gives Allen's theory much critical potential for current debates on progress, since we see more debates on the importance of (intellectual) decolonialization.

Allen believes Critical Theory can be decolonialized when we abandon our complicity to the rhetoric of modernity and its colonial logics. In its stead we have to create a metanormative contextualism, which we can only realize when we come to see our normative foundations as contingent, and not as necessary results from a history of progress, or a Hegelian march of Reason. We must, for this reason, let go of the Hegelian epistemology of imperialism. This attitude must be combined with humility and modesty regarding our own normative loyalties, and the legitimizing claims that hide beneath them. Only then will progress be possible, and can we give Enlightenment and Critical Theory a chance.²¹⁸ The

²¹¹ Ibid, pp. 71-3

²¹² Sloterdijk, 2013, pp. 658-59

²¹³ Allen, 2016, p. 52-4

²¹⁴ Ibid

²¹⁵ Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 225

²¹⁶ Allen, 2016, pp. 72-3

²¹⁷ Cf. Stengers, in *De Nieuwe Franse Filosofie*, 2011, pp. 446-49

²¹⁸ Allen, 2016, pp. 211-3

meta-normative contextualism Allen suggests, consists of two claims. First we must see moral principles or normative ideals justified only in reference to contextual, salient values, ideas about the good life, or normative horizons. Secondly, we must consider these as contingent, meaning there is no umbrella context, nor a hierarchy of contexts.²¹⁹

In short, according to Allen, Critical Theory might regain critical potential if we decolonialize it. This means we have to let go of a Western historical reading of progress, and move towards an a-historical conception of progress and normativity. For this Allen uses a reading of both Adorno and Foucault to find alternative epistemic and normative grounds for critique. In the next paragraph we will therefore look at the ideas she proposes for this purpose. Additionally we will look at what contemporary relevance Adorno's and Foucault's critical thinking has for the 21st century. Both Sloterdijk and Allen criticized Habermas quite extensively. Adorno, on the other hand, for them is still relevant and in the paragraph below it will be made clear how, and in what way they are both indebted to him.

II.III Decolonializing Critical Theory and Adorno and Foucault's relevance

Both Sloterdijk and Allen are indebted to Adorno, when we look at their goals for critique. According to Adorno, we can never know what is absolutely good or absolutely human, but we are quite able to know what is inhuman. That history has shown us. The goal of moral philosophy is therefore to renounce the concrete inhuman. We now know the contingent experience of inhumanity and suffering, and it is this we must seek to avoid. Adorno therefore suggests 'a sharing of the world' that is aimed at reconciliation, a non-totalizing form of being together and diversity. This means we have to take seriously the demands of oppressed groups, give marginalized people a voice and avoid conversations being led by asymmetrical power-relations.²²⁰ Adorno believed critique does not so much has to find its aim in progress, but has to be more immanent and serve the avoidance of catastrophes. Not that he believed progress in the future to be impossible, but he doubted it was actual in history, as does Sloterdijk, who sees history as forms of cynicism following each other up; in his work *Eurotaoism* he also speaks of the necessity of avoiding catastrophes. In Adorno's own words: "*I believe that you should start by taking progress to mean this very simple thing: that it would be better if people had no cause to fear; if there were no impending catastrophe on the horizon – if you do this, it will not provide a timeless, absolute definition of progress, but it will give the idea a concrete form. For progress today really does mean simply the prevention and avoidance of total catastrophe.*"²²¹

Like Adorno, Foucault has a non-normative reading of history and likewise does not claim history to contain any progress in both epistemic, and normative sense. This is why Allen thinks their philosophy could be relevant for re-inventing critique.

Allen shows that for both Adorno and Foucault critique has to be immanent, and not based on a progressive reading of history. This does not mean that the normative legacy of normativity should be negated altogether, but that we should re-affirm it in such a way that normative ideals such as freedom, inclusion and respect for the Other will be realized in a fuller sense.²²²

For Adorno, progress as a future orientated moral-imperative could be possible, but a progressive conception of history is a mistake. Foucault, as also seen above, shows how the way in which progress is made for instance in the social and life sciences is based on the exclusion of the Other (the poor, the insane, social deviants, homosexuals etc.). Both Adorno

²¹⁹Ibid, p. 222

²²⁰Ibid, pp. 217-22

²²¹Adorno quoted in Allen, 2016, p. 175

²²² Allen, 2016, pp. 164-65

and Foucault therefore try to escape Hegelian conceptions of history, the legacy of which is still clear with Habermas. Allen's indebtedness to Adorno becomes clear when she argues that enlightened history is filled with calamity and totalitarian in nature, even though it sought to liberate us from fear.²²³ According to Allen, Adorno helps us to see how Enlightenment and European modernity are contingent historical processes, that have no necessity in it whatsoever, nor are they necessarily progressive. Enlightenment is thus something that can not only lead to emancipation, but also to barbarism and totalitarianism.²²⁴ Adorno has a negativistic doctrine of progress; for him it is equivalent with a certain attitude towards catastrophe that amounts to only the sheer prevention and avoidance thereof.²²⁵ Here we also see the influence Adorno had on Sloterdijk, who stated that a reading of history rather leads to cynicism than a belief in progress, and that also power structures are quite able to determine the route Enlightenment takes. Instead of striving for progress, Adorno conceptualizes an 'ethics of resistance', which he sees as a collection of various strategies that are aimed at non-complicity and a refusal to comply to institutionalized forms of unfreedom. Adorno urges us to develop strategies that are aimed at preventing worst case scenario's. Progress thus amounts to resistance against dangers of relapse to catastrophe.²²⁶ Also Sloterdijk calls us to resist what he calls 'the wrong mobilization', a resistance in which a first step would be to give up our complicity to it.

With Foucault we read similar recommendations, as also shown in his work about 'counter-conduct', which consists of a care of the self that is aimed at developing resisting and anti-disciplinary ways of thinking, acting and feeling, as we also saw above. For Foucault this also means we must be aware of the ambivalent character of rationality, and not just uncritically embrace it as the panacea for all progress. Foucault aimed at a critique that consists of creating a space between freedom for ourselves and our historical a priori. Critique should then be part of undefined works on freedom.²²⁷ This resonates with Sloterdijk's point to create a between-time as a free space from which we can work on the avoidance of catastrophes. For Foucault, contra to Hegel, it is important to emphasize discontinuity in history.²²⁸ Foucault additionally criticizes the hegemony of rationality, and reasonableness, as seen throughout his work. According to Foucault it is therefore necessary to interrogate our culture to see what limits it has.²²⁹ This makes it possible to see ruptures in our systems of thinking, allowing us to free ourselves of certain ways of thinking, so that we are able to develop new ways of thinking.²³⁰ This also offers potential for critique, for it helps us realize that we can help critique morph into new forms as well.²³¹

Both Adorno and Foucault could help us to find radical new forms of critique and social change. In order to transform critique, it will also be necessary to ascertain to what forms of domination, exploitation and techniques of power are currently being deployed. For this purpose, we will offer an analysis of the current knowledge/power paradigm in the second part of the thesis, and look how we might develop a critique to resist it. We will therefore look at Byung Chul Han and his analysis on what things make us currently unfree. We will conclude the second part, as well as the thesis as a whole by discussing the field of meta-

²²³ *Ibid*, pp. 166-68

²²⁴ *libd*, p 172-73

²²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 174-5

²²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 176

²²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 177

²²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 178

²²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 180-81

²³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 182

²³¹ *Ibid*, p. 184

modernism, in order to find out where critique still manifests itself and how it could transform itself further to address current forms of domination and exploitation.

Part II: Contemporary Forms of Domination and Exploitation and Potential Critical Responses

In the first part we saw how critique has changed its meaning and value over the centuries, and more significantly and extensively over the decades crossing the 20th unto the 21st century. Critique, as we saw with Foucault, always is relational in the sense that it consists of a certain epistemic, social and behavioral stance towards social reality and the power/knowledge paradigm. The ideologies or hegemonic ‘truth(s)’ that underly this paradigm are sought to be exposed by critique, thereby correcting or exposing the deemed erroneous or contradictory aspects of this paradigm, whereby critique produces its own ‘truth(s)’. It is for this reason Foucault understands critique as a discourse. Since we concluded that critique has lost its subversive potential and effectiveness for social change in the first part, we will look for ways to revitalize critique. Before we do that, we will first see what critique could and should be aimed at, which is why we will investigate how critique might change discursively in relation to the current power/knowledge paradigm. For this reason we will additionally try and offer an analysis of the current knowledge/paradigm, reveal what kind of techniques and structures power now has and what challenge this poses for critique.

In analyzing the current forms of subjectivity in relation to the current knowledge/power paradigm, we will look at Byung Chul Han’s works on neoliberalism and neoliberal subjectivity. We will first offer an overview of his cultural diagnosis in the *Burnout Society*, where we will show how we have internalized dominating forces that make us into productive and politically loyal subjects. As a consequence, people are not only externally forced anymore to serve the economic apparatus, but now exploit themselves to maximize their achievements and productivity. Due to the depressive state of exhaustion that ensues, this might form a significant impediment to critique. Next, we will look at Han’s work on psychopolitics as a neoliberal technique of power, which serves to further undermine our critical capacities. As we will see, however, Han’s theory is mostly Eurocentric, which we will show by arguing that his theory does not explain the fact that disciplinary and external forms of coercion and power still exist outside of the West, and partially serves the exact purposes of capital beyond the West. In addition we will look at how critique can be understood as a social phenomenon and how it can serve as a means for emancipation. With Luc Boltanski we will see that critique has the purpose of revealing hegemonic forms of domination, which is something employed by a minority, to exploit a majority of people.²³² The aim of a critical practice and theory is then to reveal contradictions within structures of power, or to unmask its underlying ideology with the purpose to provide the dominated and exploited people with critical tools to guide them to the way of emancipation. The first task of critique is then usually to see what cries for justice and what forms of moral indignation there are. In other words: it seeks to see where and how actors manifest dissatisfaction or anger, which could constitute grounds for systematic critique. As we saw in the first part, critique also has to have some theory of the forms of oppression and domination that are taken place. Critique can then serve to expose errors underlying this paradigm, and render social reality as unacceptable.²³³

²³²Boltanski, 2011, pp. 8-9

²³³ibid, p. 5

Chapter I. Exhaustion, Internalized Domination, Permissive Power and its Consequences for Critique

In this chapter, we will look at the current knowledge/power paradigm and as such look at how critique could relate to it, by making use of the analysis of critique given above. For this purpose, we will look into forms of domination and exploitation and at what techniques of power are deployed to realize them. We will assess what this means for critique, in terms of the impediments this poses to critique, and what this means for the form it could and should take. We will argue that the forms of critique discussed above are not fully able to critique the current forms of domination and exploitation, since they have radically changed their form. If critique is to have potential, it should likewise change its form. This is not to say that the above forms of critique have lost potential in their entirety, but that they have to be improved and moreover changed to be able to challenge current forms of domination and exploitation. Above we saw that one of the challenges to critique is that it is Eurocentric. In this chapter we will therefore not only analyze contemporary forms of domination and exploitation that Han addresses, but we will also argue that his theory is as Eurocentric as the Critical Theories that Allen problematized and sought to decolonialize. We will see how the types of exploitation and ensuing suffering Han describes and the conclusions he draws from it are only applicable to the West, and only to a certain segment of some of its societies. At the end of the chapter, we will assess what this means for the critical potential of Han's theory, and what this implies for critique more in general.

I.1 From external to exhaustive internalized domination and exploitation

We saw in the first part, especially with Adorno and Horkheimer, that power and forms of domination are particularly negative, in the sense that they oppress members of society, curb individual desires and forcefully make people compliant to a certain (socio-economic) order.

In Foucault's work we have seen that different forms of power are aimed at disciplining the subject in order to make it politically loyal and economically useful. It is aimed at making the body compliant and healthy, in order to increase its productivity and power. We have seen that power is then no longer just oppressive (as with Adorno and Horkheimer), but enabling and vitalizing, in the sense that it makes individuals shape their life as a private entrepreneurship, thereby forcing themselves to be productive. The healthier and the more effective the working population, the better. Foucault showed how disciplinary power in this sense served to create economically effective and productive individuals and how bio-power took over this same aim, but extrapolated it to society and its workforce as a whole. With bio-power life is brought in the domain of specific calculations. Power and knowledge strengthen each other with the aim to make life controllable and utilizable as a biological unity. Foucault here makes a distinction between multiple forms of power. The first he describes is sovereign power, where the sovereign has power over its subjects through law and jurisprudence. The goal is normalization and surveillance, leading to the docility of its subjects. Another form is disciplinary power that consists of individual discipline, as we saw. Bio-power is aimed at the social regulation of the entire population by surveilling and controlling its health and vitality through the social and life sciences and statistics. Foucault saw this power emerge during the rise of modern capitalism, which needed able and productive bodies in order to grow. Bio-power therefore sought to optimize and strengthen life, both individually and collectively. When bodies, or populations were at risk to fall beneath the physical and mental health norm, they were normalized in order to be able to fulfill their productive, economic or military

function again. The purpose of this form of power, in short, is to enhance the productivity of life in terms of health, wealth and work.²³⁴ The techniques of power that were employed in times of modern capitalism thus served to make people compliant to the economic apparatus, and to make them serve it as effectively as possible. Above we have seen what forms of critique have manifested itself in order to challenge this form of domination with Critical Theories, but also with Adorno's 'ethics of resistance', and Foucault's 'counter-conduct'. Adorno had set as his main goal to avoid the catastrophes that might follow from such a power paradigm. The situation wherein these catastrophes might manifest themselves in, however, has changed. The stable factor is that the economic apparatus is still exploitative and still contributes to growing inequality, poverty and social injustice. What is changed however, is that catastrophic risks such as climate change are now much more immanent, and the way capital functions has also changed significantly with the shift from material modes of production, to immaterial modes of production, as we will also see below. The techniques of power have also significantly changed since Adorno and Foucault's time. They are no longer only disciplinary and coercive, but have managed to make us exploit ourselves. This stems from the false sense of freedom that comes with maximizing our achievements and productivity, as we will see below with Han. This means the economic apparatus does not have to coerce us externally anymore to do its bidding, but we have internalized this coercion.

Looking at contemporary times, we must indeed conclude the late capitalist society Adorno and Horkheimer describe is no more and that we have also left Foucault's disciplinary society behind us. Our oppression does not consist in negation anymore, nor are individual desires curbed and disciplined or normalized. Rather, because we left the disciplinary society behind us, we have internalized power. It is for this reason Han describes our time not in terms of negativity, but as typified by an excess in positivity. The 20th century, the century of Adorno, Horkheimer and Foucault, Han argues, was characterized by an immunological paradigm. This was a paradigm that made nations and their politics hostile towards every 'outside', which it attempted to neutralize. This meant that there was a very clear line between in- and outside. This line was either a national, political or ideological one. Everything that was considered as 'outside' was neutralized, or kept out²³⁵, as we also saw in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, thereby fending off everything alien, different or strange. The economic apparatus, and the culture industry, we have seen them argue, was aimed at keeping everything strange and eccentric out, which is why people that did not conform to the economic apparatus or the culture industry, either went bankrupt or were forced a life of social isolation, eccentricity and poverty.

The immunological paradigm, where attack and defense determined all acts, was aimed at the biological and the social level and society as a whole, according to Han. All that was strange, was kept out and everything other had to be eliminated. This paradigm, Han argues, has now come to its end. There is no immunological paradigm anymore of defense. Rather, our times are characterized by the disappearance of being other or strange. Contemporary times can be recognized by 'the equal'.²³⁶ When we look at this from a more phenomenological level we can take the example of immigrants. While within the immunological paradigm they were considered as other or strange, now they are not really seen as a threat or as being dangerous anymore, but more as inconvenient, burdensome or

²³⁴Fiaccadori, 2015, p. 151

²³⁵Han, 2014, pp. 9-10

²³⁶ibid

annoying. This has to do with the process of globalization, because any immune-reaction would only slow the process of open borders for the market. We live in a time of hybrids with a mixture of styles in culture, identities, consumption and lifestyles and this is opposed to immunology.²³⁷ Below we will see to what extent we could follow this line of reasoning of Han. While Han might be correct when it comes to certain segments of society and its power structures, we will argue that there are still techniques of power that function in accordance to the immunological paradigm when we look at how the West treats immigrants and its unemployed, to name but two examples. Indeed all freedom is given to capital, and immigrants are indeed usually seen as an economic burden, but with the rise of nationalistic populism, we see the immunological paradigm might be making a comeback. The xenophobia that fuels this, makes refugees and immigrants again being treated in immunological fashion.²³⁸ This is of course contradictory with what we saw above. We might therefore conclude that although we moved past the immunological paradigm, which shifted into something new, the immunological paradigm is still manifest sometimes, resulting in a realm of internal paradoxes. Secondly, this could lead us to observe that although indeed the economic apparatus shifted away from the immunological paradigm, but that the rise in nationalistic populism shows that the political field still embodies immunological elements.

Dialectics, and negation, which was paramount to Adorno and Horkheimer's theory about Enlightenment, is a characteristic of immunity. The immunological is conceived as alien, as a negativity that enters the same, which seeks to negate or deny it.²³⁹ With Adorno and Horkheimer we have seen that this is what Enlightened Reason does: every thinking or act that is not instrumental, or does not fit in strategic rationality, is negated or coopted by enlightened rationality in service of the economic apparatus. The same goes for the culture industry: every form of style that does not fit its paradigm, is excluded or eliminated. The individual, or individuality, argue Adorno and Horkheimer, is nullified, because other-ness is negated.²⁴⁰

Now that the alien other is disappearing, we live in a time which is stripped of negation. While Adorno and Horkheimer feared the loss of the negating power of thought, or philosophy, they could not conceive of a total diminishment of negation. To give another phenomenological illustration: this is why all pathology of this age is the result of an overabundance of positivity, not of violent negation. Violence does not stem from negativity anymore, but from the equal. The non-immunological defense that follows, tries to repel a too much of sameness, or equal.²⁴¹ We see this in a levelling of playing fields, where formerly excluded peoples and groups are included and made same by culture and the economy. We also see this in the culture industry, where diversification and multiculturalism becomes part of popculture. We see this in the inclusionary form of exclusion that takes place towards people who are forced to assimilate themselves to the dominant cultural logics, but also to the economic apparatus. For instance, the unemployed are still considered 'other', but instead of excluding them, they are included in all sorts of programs to enhance their 'participation' in society.

The violence of positivity is the result of overproduction, overachieving, and

²³⁷Ibid, pp. 11-2

²³⁸ Van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2017, also argue xenophobic populism is again becoming a threat to civilization. See p. 6

²³⁹Han, p. 12

²⁴⁰Cf. Han, 2014, p. 12

²⁴¹Ibid, pp. 12-3

overcommunication, Han argues. Since people have internalized the pressure to achieve and want to maximize their productivity themselves, we see a violent excess of internal overstrain, ultimately exhausting and depressing the subject. For this reason immunological defense is not possible anymore, but only digestive-neural aversion. What Han means by this is that since people through immaterial modes of production mainly use their cognitive capabilities, the excess in production and achieving results in neural problems in the form of weariness and exhaustion. This is why we live in times of neural violence.²⁴² We need only look at current numbers about the rise of depression, anxiety, burnouts and suicides to see Han might be right in his diagnosis.²⁴³ However, Han's analysis is mainly Eurocentric and does not explain the increase of depression and suicide in the developing world, as we will also see below. In other words, whereas we on the one hand indeed see that people burnout, end up in exhausted states of depression or even commit suicide as the result of a pressure to achieve, whether externally or internally, this might prove to be a very Western problem.

The violence of the positive also does not assume enmity: it is on the contrary free to develop in permissive and peaceful societies. So unlike Adorno and Horkheimer's diagnosis, where the economic apparatus is seen as inherently violent and even anti-Semitic, neural violence as a result of positivity is immanent. The violence of the positive is not privative, but saturates; not exclusive, but exhaustive.²⁴⁴ Neural diseases like ADHD, burn-out syndrome and depression are the result of an overabundance of stimuli.²⁴⁵ In response to this argument we will later argue that Han in his theory only partially explains one of the problems we are confronted with today. If we follow Han's line of reasoning, the mental health crisis that is surgent in the West is due to the fact that we have internalized all coercion to achieve and that we become depressive as a result of our relentless self-exploitation. This might be true for certain segments and strata of society, but it does not explain the external violence and coercion that is still deployed against the poor, unemployed, immigrants, (post)colonial others or other minorities. They are not even in the privileged position to (freely, albeit indeed from a false sense of freedom) maximize their achievements and productivity, nor are they overstimulated like us by positive stimuli. When we look at suicide, for instance, of the 800.000 people that commit suicide each year internationally, 20% are committed by farmers in the developing world (~16.000 farmers in India, for instance), where the cause is not the overachievement and selfexploitation Han discusses.²⁴⁶ Instead, studies show, these farmers commit suicide due to socioeconomic factors, including increasing indebtedness.²⁴⁷ Also, when we look at Sub-Saharan Africa, mental health problems are the biggest contributor to 'disability adjusted life years'²⁴⁸, even outpacing suffering from a lack of primary goods.²⁴⁹

²⁴²Ibid, pp. 13-4

²⁴³See for instance: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5198754/>, <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/health/we-live-in-an-age-of-anxiety-surge-in-mental-health-problems-in-last-six-years-36285433.html>, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-personal-renaissance/201801/the-alarmed-rise-in-teen-mental-illness>, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/05/students-mental-ill-health-toxic-world> & <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/apr/01/recession-surge-mental-health-problems>

²⁴⁴Han, 2014, p. 15

²⁴⁵Ibid, p. 16

²⁴⁶ See: https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/wr/mm6525a1.htm?s_cid=mm6525a1_w?ftag=MSFd61514f

²⁴⁷ See: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2210600615300277>

²⁴⁸ This is a metric to measure how much life years are affected by disability due to some external or internal cause regarding physical and mental health.

Furthermore, when we look at one of the consequences of climate change for the poor, we see a correlation between suicides in India and the effects global warming.²⁵⁰ The mental health plague we are thus dealing with, is not only a Western problem in the sense that it results from exhaustive self-exploitation. Depression and suicide are not problems that are limited to the West and can have other causes than overproduction or overachievement. The reasons for suicide in India and Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, do not stem from people's own exhaustive self-exploitation, but to a certain extent is caused by the self-exhaustive capitalism from the West which drives them into poverty and natural disaster. When we look at the economic conditions that are most probably conducive to mental health plagues not only in the West, but also in India and other developing countries as we now have seen, it is even all the more cynical to realize that global warming, as Naomi Klein²⁵¹ adequately showed, is caused by Western capitalism. So the more we produce and achieve here, the more the poor will suffer from the effects of it not only through resource exploitation, but also due to the damage caused to the climate by economic growth.

Looking at the suicide rates among students again in the West, some plausibly assume that pressure to achieve might be the cause of suicide.²⁵² Looking at the West, again however, there are also other explanations for the rise of mental health problems and suicides amongst students and young people, namely debt²⁵³, which is something the economic apparatus forces us to pay, making it a profitable praxis for some. This means students not so much only discipline themselves to achieve maximally, but are also disciplined and externally dominated by debt, which is an external economic form of domination and exploitation. Han therefore goes too far in claiming that the only form of exploitation is self-exploitation and that every form of coercion is internalized.

The achievement society Han describes is different from the disciplinary society Foucault conceptualizes. Whereas Foucault described a society where people were disciplined within different institutions, creating docile individuals, we now see a society of high potentials, where people are not disciplined into obedience, but are entrepreneurs of their own self. *Achievementsubjects*, Han argues, emerge after disciplined subjects.²⁵⁴ We might wonder if Han underestimates the role institutions still play in people's subjectivity, in terms of what they expect from themselves and others and to what extent they still, although subtly, might contribute to us wanting to be high potentials. He also might overlook the contexts where bodies are still made docile and are externally forced to become so. If we look at the case with students again, for instance, and since social reality is usually reproduced within education, educational institutions are in that sense still significant disciplining actors. For critique this means that the indebting and enclosing of students within the educational systems has consequences for the extent to which they can become critical subjects. Because the education system not only indebts but also encloses students, students in the end pay for their own

²⁴⁹ See this report:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55f47404e4b06b1754d1df07/t/5786b1eebe65944b87321d9c/1468445169745/MentalHealthinSSAPublicReport.pdf>

²⁵⁰ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/31/suicides-of-nearly-60000-indian-farmers-linked-to-climate-change-study-claims?ftag=MSFd61514f>

²⁵¹ In her book *This Changes Everything. Capitalism Versus the Climate* (2015).

²⁵² See for instance: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/education/edlife/stress-social-media-and-suicide-on-campus.html>

²⁵³ See: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/c-cryn-johannsen/student-loan-debt-suicides_b_1638972.html?guccounter=1

²⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 17

exploitation in the sense that they have to pay off their debts at some point.²⁵⁵ This shows the way they are exploited is more complex than Han would suggest. If indeed they exploit themselves to achieve maximally, the exploitation does not stop at that internal point, but is externally also practiced by the educational system and the debt economy.

Han, however, sees the disciplinary society as something of the past. According to him it consisted of a model of negativity, determined by the negation of prohibition and inhabitation. Under the influence of increasing deregulation (which is of course typical of our neo-liberal era) an unbounded being able or 'yes-we-can' mentality has become the positive modality. Commandment has been replaced by project, initiative and motivation. This paradigm shift is not one of a rupture, however, but must be seen as a continuation. Furthermore, it would go too far to claim that today there is no more external domination, or no more punishment anymore in Western society. The collective consciousness is still determined by the aspiration to maximize production.²⁵⁶ In this sense, Adorno and Horkheimer are not proved entirely wrong. The difference, however, is that whereas in the society they described people were forced to maximize production by forcefully integrating them in the economic apparatus and by negating their individual dreams, hopes and phantasies, people now force themselves to do so.

Han would probably typify Adorno and Horkheimer's theory as one that is centered on a negative schema of oppression and domination. In 21st century, Han argues, this has been replaced by the positive schema of achievement. The negative schema at some point reached its limits, by becoming unable to maximize production any further. The positive *can* and *being able* is much more effective than the negative *should*.²⁵⁷

When we consider student and other debts again - that forces so many people in a situation of economic enslavement - however, we see that there are still external dominating and exploitative forces that coerce people externally through the negative *should*. Although Han might be right in claiming that people voluntarily maximize their achievements to such an extent that they relentlessly exploit themselves in our Western *achievement society*, it is hard to imagine that people coerce themselves to pay their debts. This of course especially holds true in the developing world, where there are forms of coercion that Han does not discuss, since his theory has a Eurocentric character. In the West people perhaps indeed force themselves to maximally achieve, but in countries like India, for instance, we see coerced labor to make people pay off their debts.²⁵⁸ In these both cases a very powerful *should* and *ought* are still operative. Here the negative schema of domination and exploitation are still operative. These and other examples might lead us to agree with Allen that a theory does not have full critical potential when it only shows forms of domination and exploitation that are operative in the West and is only applicable to a certain segment of society.

According to Han, the shift from the *ought* to *can* mentality led to a similar shift in our subconsciousness from *ought* to *can*. Kant already stated *ought* implies *can*, an adagio that has now come to economic productive fruition. The *achievement subject* is much more effective than the disciplined subject, but is still to some extent driven forth by the *ought*, because this subject is still disciplined due to the disciplinary stage that preceded the achievers-stage.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, pp. 25-6

²⁵⁶ Ibid, pp. 17-8

²⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 18

²⁵⁸ Not for nothing something like an anti-slavery movement exists that writes critical articles on coercion through debt in India. In the article below they speak of debt bondage and bonded labor. See: <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/bonded-labour/>

Because this subject is encouraged to take initiative and is being demanded to ‘be himself’, he gets exhausted by this constant striving after this purpose, leading to depression. Another cause of depression in contemporary times is the lack of social binding that is the result of rampant individualism and the fragmentation of everything social. The *achievers-society* is characterized by systematic immanent violence which causes psychological infarcts: pressure to achieve, causes exhaustion-depression.²⁵⁹ According to Oliver James, the mental health plague that has ensued from the rise of mental distress in the West is correlated with the neoliberal mode of capitalism. What neoliberal capitalism does in order to prevent being charged with being the cause of this mental health plague, is designating it as an individual problem, thereby privatizing, and depoliticizing mental distress.²⁶⁰ Because the exhaustions and depressions that ensue are pathologized on the individual level, “*any question of social systematic causation is ruled out.*”²⁶¹ Another cause of mental distress stems from what Fisher calls *reflexive impotence*. This is the reflective moment when people know things are bad, but at the same time realize that they can do nothing about it. This is somewhat different than the cynicism that we saw Sloterdijk address. The similarity is however that reflexive impotence, like cynicism, leads to the self-fulfilling prophecy and the belief that nothing can be done, which is exactly what leads to the reproduction of the current status quo, which also means people will refuse to leave that ratrace that Han sees as exhaustive.

According to Fisher, these problems increasingly face the young, especially students. What he also addresses is the problematic way leisure time is pursued, which Fisher sees as an expression of depressive hedonia, while usually depression is seen as anhedonia. The latter, is usually understood as the inability to get pleasure. Nowadays, however, depression also expresses itself by “*an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure.*” There is always a sense to miss out, or that something is missing. According to Fisher, this has to do with the ambiguous structural position students find themselves in. On the one hand, they are in a sense still subjects of disciplinary institutions, but also are now expected to behave as consumers of services. Fisher argues this is the result of living in a control society, following Deleuze, where institutions are embedded in a dispersed cooperation. This form of power is indefinite, in the sense that it operates through indefinite postponement whereby people are expected to learn, work, and train themselves during their entire lifetime. The consequence of this mode of power is that external surveillance is succeeded by internal policing. Control, as we already saw with Foucault, only works when complying with it.²⁶² Like Han, Fisher argues we have moved beyond the disciplinary society, though. Not the body is the aim of rigid postures anymore, but again it is the mind that is captured. Technologies of control function to capture the attention of minds “*with their systems of perpetual consumption and continuous development.*”²⁶³ The digital technologies of communication permeates everyone and everything, where maximal profit is made by exploiting maximum attention. In this sense Han speaks of an economic panopticon, where all we consume and produce is monitored with the purpose to further steer our attention towards consumption.²⁶⁴ The panopticon of the disciplinary society is thus replaced by an a-perspectival digital panopticon. The amount of distraction that follows from 21st century media is much more effective in capturing our

²⁵⁹Ibid, p. 19

²⁶⁰Fisher, 2009, p. 19

²⁶¹Ibid, p. 20

²⁶²Ibid, pp. 21-2

²⁶³Ibid, p.23

²⁶⁴Han, 2014, p. 101

attention to consume entertainment than the culture industry in the time of Adorno and Horkheimer was. This might mean that the masses have perhaps become even more unthinking and uncritical than they already feared.

Fisher's view differs from Han in the case of students, however. Fisher points out they not always strive after maximum achievement, but rather fall into hedonic lassitude. This also shows in the unwillingness to read. The students are, in a sense, post-literate and are too wired to concentrate, where also the decay of disciplinary systems shows. Often students claim they are bored, especially by reading. Being bored only really means being removed from the sensation-stimulus matrix of communication. This leads to even more fragmentation of subjectivity than the emerging culture industry caused in Adorno and Horkheimer's time.²⁶⁵

Unlike Fisher, however, Han argues that our ability to relax has disappeared as a consequence of the restructuring of the economy of our attention. This also has consequences for how we relate to the Other, because it impedes our ability to truly listen. The hyperactive ego has not the contemplative attention to contribute to a community of listeners.²⁶⁶

When it comes to creating the new, we are reminded by Han of the work of Hannah Arendt, who argued that only when we act we can create something new, something that neoliberalism is incapable of due to the primacy it gives to work. When we act, according to Arendt, we create something new. But our ability to act, in modern society, is impeded by labor and work. Human beings, Arendt argues, are fully reduced to a full-continuous working being. Instead of acting and initiating the new, modern man is passively subjugated to economic survival. Thinking that is required for acting, is thus reduced to mere calculation. This has led, argues Arendt, to an overwhelming passivity. This means there is also no place for critique, for if we are unable to listen to the call for justice of the Other,²⁶⁷ or to exchange thoughts in the attempt to make our society more plural and inclusive, this impedes its democratic potential.

Things have changed, however, in the modern *achievement society*, says Han. The individual is no longer nullified, as Adorno, Horkheimer and Arendt feared, but rather taken up into the *achievement society* where work and labor are highly individualized. The late-modern individual is not nullified, but its ego is instead enhanced. The passive, nullified individual is thus succeeded by a hyperactive and hyper-neurotic one that is full of ego. As a consequence, the late-modern self stands completely on its own and is detached from everything that is social.²⁶⁸ The bare life of the individual, that Agamben for instance describes, is now fully sacralized and must be conserved at all cost for the purpose of production. The general acceleration that is the consequence of our hyperactivity is that it incites new forms of coercion. The master-slave dialectic of Hegel is outdated, master and slave alike have become a slave of work. Above all, in the coercive society, everyone carries his own working camp with him. In this camp, you are both victim and perpetrator, which leads to self-exploitation.²⁶⁹

The lack of attention that is the result of modern acceleration is that we not only lose our ability to be open for the Other – for that would need the negation of the interruption. Anger is stopped by the modern acceleration, so that there is no room for it.. Anger always has its own relation towards time. Anger wants acceleration to stop. Due to the fact society has become

²⁶⁵Fisher, 2009, p. 25

²⁶⁶Han, 2014, p. 24

²⁶⁷ Levinas, 1998, pp. 6-8 & pp. 166-7

²⁶⁸Fisher, 2009, p. 29

²⁶⁹Ibid, p. 30

disperse and fragmented, there is no energy anymore for anger. Anger gives us the ability to interrupt a situation and let a new one begin. This is of course crucial for critique, but if there is no more time and energy for the expression of anger as a form of critique, we lose our ability to begin something new and are still being encompassed by the maelstrom of achievement and work.

As Adorno and Horkheimer have already shown, thinking also has the function to negate, an activity that spurs forth the negative. In the all-encompassing positivization of society, this ability has been co-opted by the accelerative forces, which have degraded us to autistic achievementmachines. We cannot, as a result, deal with negative experiences. This is problematic, because negative potentiality is necessary to not do something. The negation to not do something, is above all an essential aspect of contemplation. The hyperactivity of contemporary times is, paradoxically, an extreme passive way of going about things that does not allow any free act.²⁷⁰ Here Han would probably agree with Adorno and Horkheimer's fear that all intellectual activity has become part of the division of labor, and such completely appropriated for economic purposes.

Instead of thinking, the achievement society contributes to the inclination of people to enhance their neurological makeup, not to improve the qualities of their thoughts or imagination, but to focus better on producing.²⁷¹ People also enhance themselves as achievementmachines and are deemed to function without error or fault. Human beings are thus reduced to only the vital function of achievement. One of the consequences is that this leads to excessive exhaustion and tiredness. This, for Han, is typical for a society that is lacking in any negativity and is controlled by an overabundance of positivity. The depressiveness this culminates in, is an individual one that makes people lonely and isolated. Again, this of course also has consequences for the potential development of a new critique. When people are only focused on their achievements to such an extent that they become narcissistic, exhausted and depressed, there is no more room for a critical theory of society.

The achievement subject is thus not only exploited, as was the case with Adorno and Horkheimer, but exploits himself, without any external coercion.²⁷² The subject no longer is a victim of the economic apparatus and of domination, such as Adorno and Horkheimer argued, but a victim of himself. Depression that is caused by overachievement is a form of exhaustion. Because it can no longer achieve, this exhaustion leads to destructive self-blame and auto-aggression.²⁷³ This has, of course, significant consequences for critique. The *achievement-subject* is not concerned anymore with criticizing any external oppressive and dominating forces that Adorno and Horkheimer would deem necessary for emancipation. The exhausted subject aims all critique at himself. Being thus caught up in a war with himself, he has neither the will, nor the energy for critique. Consequently, external forces of domination do not have to concern themselves with forcing the subject to work, nor do they have to do anything to exploit the subject. This the subject now does entirely by himself. Freedom and compulsion, as a result, neatly coincide. The only demand now comes from the voluntary coercion to maximize its achievements. Excessive working and achieving culminate in self-exploitation. This is much more efficient than external exploitation by any other, because it coincides with a false sense of freedom. The achievementsubject believes itself to be free in its inclination to

²⁷⁰Ibid, pp. 35-6

²⁷¹Ibid, p. 43

²⁷²Ibid, p. 20

²⁷³Ibid

ever strive for more achievement and productivity.

That all exploitation has internalized and external domination and coercion are not as necessary anymore as they were in Adorno and Horkheimer's time, does not mean that power does not deploy any techniques anymore to make people comply to the economic apparatus. According to Han, techniques of power still exist, but they have changed significantly, also due to the developments in Western capitalist societies described above. For this reason we will look at the techniques of power that Han discusses in the paragraph below. Again we will assess what impediments these form to critique. It will be relevant to look into Han's concept of psycho-politics, since it is aimed at our affectivity and feelings, something from which according to meta-modernists our contemporary critique stems from as well.

I.II Psychopolitics: from oppressive to permissive power and from coercion to seduction

In *Psychopolitics*, Han further elaborates on our contemporary subjectivity and the new forms of domination. Following up on his argument that people coerce themselves and are not dominated externally anymore, he now looks at what techniques of power have made and make this possible. Looking at these arguments will also complement the above and make it easier to understand why exactly people nowadays exploit themselves, in a seemingly voluntary manner and how the manipulation of our emotions play a role in this.

For Han, our selfexploitation follows from the fact that we do not believe to be subjugated by anything anymore; we believe that we are free subjects that continuously re-invent themselves. Han calls this the transition from 'subject' to project. This transition goes hand in hand with a sense of freedom. However, this project becomes a form of coercion, an even more efficient form of subjectification and subjugation. The *I* as project thinks it has freed itself from any external coercion, but now instead subjugates itself to internal coercion. The form of self-coercion it exhibits is one of achievement- and optimization compulsion. As a consequence, freedom is not domination's opposite anymore, freedom itself now ensues domination. The freedom of being able results in more forms of compulsion than the disciplinary paradigm was able to employ.²⁷⁴ The psychological diseases such as depression and burnout that Han elaborated on, as seen above, express a deep crisis within freedom, a signal that freedom turns over in compulsion.²⁷⁵

The neo-liberal subject as entrepreneur of the self is not able to create relations with others who are free from this purpose. This is also an impediment for freedom, because in order to be free, one has to be able to establish a relationship with others. Han refers back to Marx who had a similar conception of freedom by conceiving it as something that manifests itself within a community where people can develop their talents in any direction. Being free thus means realizing things together.²⁷⁶ The absolute isolation the neoliberal regime leads to, makes us unfree. According to Han, this has led to a new need to define freedom and reinvent it in order to escape this dialectic of freedom, where freedom leads to unfreedom.²⁷⁷ Again referring back to Marx, Han argues that individual freedom is just a ruse of capital. The 'freedom' to compete is nothing other than the relation capital has with itself. Due to competitive freedom, capital is facilitated with the means for reproduction. This means that the more competitive individual freedom there is, the more effectively can capital reproduce

²⁷⁴Han, 2016, p. 9

²⁷⁵Ibid, p. 10

²⁷⁶Ibid, p. 11

²⁷⁷Ibid, pp. 10-1

itself, giving capital an automatic subjectivity.²⁷⁸

Neoliberalism, Han argues, is a system that knows how to exploit freedom itself. In other words, whereas other forms of domination take away our freedom to function properly, neoliberalism is a powerparadigm that exploits freedom itself in order to be effective. Whereas Adorno and Horkheimer feared our abilities for freely expressing ourselves, being playful and communicating was made impossible by the economic apparatus and the culture industry, it are now exactly these freedom practices that are exploited. With Adorno and Horkheimer, people were exploited against their individual needs. This made exploitation less effective as it is now. Now we see that individual needs are even promoted, in order to exploit them as boundlessly as possible.²⁷⁹

Instead of leading to communism, as Marx predicted, capitalism instead has transformed from industrial to neoliberal capitalism with immaterial means of production. The laborer, in addition, has been transformed into an entrepreneur. This is why there are no longer exploited laborers, but self-exploitative entrepreneurs.²⁸⁰

Within the immaterial production mode, everyone is owner of the means of production themselves. Social revolution, that is based on the distinction between exploiting subjects and exploited subjects is hence impossible.²⁸¹ The individualization of the self-exploitative *achievementsubject* impedes forming a political *we* that is capable of collective action.²⁸² This means critique on a collective level has become impossible.

The myth of success that Adorno and Horkheimer spoke of is now perpetuated. When people fail in the neoliberal *achievementssociety*, they deem themselves responsible, making them feel ashamed instead of criticizing the society or system they are part of and that conduced to their 'failure'. This means neoliberalism does not call resistance upon itself. Under the regime of exploitation, it was still possible that the exploited formed a community and collectively resisted the system that exploited them. Instead, under the neoliberal regime, people direct all aggression towards themselves, which transforms the exploited not in a revolutionary, but in a depressive person.²⁸³

Han seems to point at a form of false consciousness not only when he argues we mistakenly think we are free, but also when he says we do not work anymore in accordance to our needs, but rather we work for capital. Capital, in turn, generates its own needs, that we falsely mistake for our own needs. This, according to Han, throws us out of the level of immanence, where life is related to itself instead of making it subject to an external goal.²⁸⁴

According to Han, capital has arisen to a new transcendence, consequently becoming a new master. Politics therefore is again reduced to a state of servitude, namely servitude to capital. When called out to act, as a result, politicians often state they must choose from a set of limited choices, blaming the high indebtedness for their inhibition to freely act. And perhaps, Han speculates, we permanently indebt ourselves so that we do not have to act, we can as such escape the burden to be free and responsible.²⁸⁵

When it comes to inhibitions to our freedom, Han observes another factor that inhibits our

²⁷⁸Ibid

²⁷⁹Ibid

²⁸⁰Ibid, pp. 12-3

²⁸¹Ibid, p. 13

²⁸²Cf. Boltanski, Streeck

²⁸³Ibid, p. 14

²⁸⁴Ibid

²⁸⁵Cf. Arendt and Fromm

freedom. Han identifies the state of absolute transparency of contemporary times as such. The boundless freedom and communication the digital net promised, has dialectically turned into total control and surveillance. Social media have turned into digital panopticons that surveils and exploits social life. This panopticon is more efficient than the one Foucault described.²⁸⁶

Whereas the inhabitants of Bentham's panopticon were isolated and not allowed to talk to each other, in the digital panopticon people communicate with each other intensively and non-stop and make themselves voluntarily transparent. The digital panopticon is only possible through voluntary selfexposure. People as such actively help build the contemporary panopticon. The *digital controlsociety*, like capital, intensively abuses freedom. The digital Big Brother consequently can delegate all his work to his inhabitants. All the data is thus freely provided, not compulsory, but from an inner need. This is what makes the digital panopticon so efficient.²⁸⁷

The transparency that is demanded in the name of freedom of information is nothing other than a neoliberal dispositive. More information and communication within the current immaterial mode of production means more productivity, acceleration and growth. The information is a positive entity that can circulate independently from any context. Every form of difference is abolished, since they are only boundaries for boundless communication. Also persons are stripped of their internal world, it also being something that would slow communication down. Every negativity, difference or strangeness is stripped of internality and transformed by the positivity of the communicable which makes it consumable.²⁸⁸

Moreover, this results in total conformity, a part of the economy of transparency is the suppressing of deviations. This effect of conformity is caused by the surveillance of everyone by everyone. Every communication by moderators is brought back to the level of consensus.²⁸⁹

As a result of all the above mentioned developments, Han argues we are entering the era of psychopolitics which is developing from passive surveillance to active steering. A second crisis of freedom ensues, and its victim is now free will itself. Han names the figure of Big Data as a psychopolitical instrument that attains comprehensive knowledge, coopted by power, making it possible to intervene on the psyche on a prereflexive level. For freedom, openness of the future is necessary, but Big Data makes prognoses of human behavior possible, making the future calculable and steerable. Digital psychopolitics transforms the negativity of the free decision to the positivity of the status quo. The person positivizes himself to a case that is quantifiable, calculable and steerable. Big Data thus leads to the end of the person, as of the free will.²⁹⁰

Power, as we have also seen with Boland and Foucault, can have many modes of appearance, negation of freedom being its most direct one. Power as negation of freedom is something Adorno and Horkheimer especially elaborated on. This mode of power, is able to assert its will by nullifying the will of the oppressed, even with violence. Power is then limited to breaking any forms of resistance and by enforcing obedience. The greater the power, as we saw with Foucault, the more silently it operates. What Han shows, is that power is not always exclusionary, forbidding or censoring, and is not always the opposite of freedom. It can even make use of freedom. Only in negative form does power manifest itself

²⁸⁶Ibid, p. 15

²⁸⁷Ibid, p. 16

²⁸⁸Ibid

²⁸⁹Ibid, p. 17

²⁹⁰Ibid, p. 18

as a no-saying power that breaks every will and negates freedom. Currently, power is taking on a more permissive form. In its permissive character, in its friendliness, it distances itself from her negativity and presents itself as freedom.²⁹¹

Han again contrasts this form of power with disciplinary power. The latter was governed by negativity, and the power paradigm Adorno and Horkheimer described likewise. Its form is inhibitive, not permissive. As such, it can give no description of neoliberalism, which shines with positivity. The neoliberal form of power takes on a subtle and uncanny character and thus becomes entirely invisible. The consequence is that the subjugated subject is fully unaware of its subjugation. As a consequence, it will mistakenly consider itself free.²⁹²

The form of power Han discusses activates, motivates and optimizes, and does not impede or oppress. Its efficiency is further strengthened because it pleases and fulfills needs, instead of repressing them. Instead of making people obedient, it makes them dependent. This form of friendly power does not operate against the will of its subjugated subjects, but steers their will in its advantage. In this sense, she is more seductive than oppressive. It does not repress emotions, as Adorno and Horkheimer saw as characteristic of the tools of domination employed by the economic apparatus, but instead tries to arouse positive emotions in order to exploit them. By seducing the subject, it does not turn against the will of the subject, but tries to meet it. Its aim is the human psyche, which it tries to invite to share, participate and express all its opinions, needs, desires and preferences by inciting it constantly to communicate. Free *will* is thus exploited to such an extent that it is destroyed in favor of the free *choice* of different offers. As a consequence, people subjugate themselves by consuming and communicating, while it likes and buys.²⁹³

What furthermore makes the new techniques of power so effective is that they are able to coopt any form of resistance it itself provokes. Neoliberalism strongly incentivizes us to optimize ourselves, making it a very efficient form of power and exploitation. The neoliberal achievement subject sees itself as an entrepreneur of the self and exploits itself freely and passionately. The self as work of art is a treacherous sham that is conserved and exploited by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism ensures that the individual initiates techniques of the self, in order to invite it to exploit itself, resembling the context of power in itself, while it interprets it as freedom. Self-optimization and subjugation, freedom and exploitation thus neatly coincide.²⁹⁴ Additionally, the goal of the neoliberal imperative is to take away all impediments and barriers to production by correcting it through therapies or other forms of self-optimization. It aims to make everything measurable, comparable and subjugated to the logics of the market. The neoliberal era also dawns the age of exhaustion, as we also saw in *The Burnout Society*.

In this chapter we have seen that in the West we have shifted from external domination to internalized domination, meaning self-exploitation has succeeded external exploitation. Moreover, since 21st century media and technologies succeed even better than the culture industry Adorno and Horkheimer criticized in their time, our attention is increasingly taken hostage and steered in the direction of the consumption of commodities and entertainment. For critique this has dire consequences: in the burnout society we are too exhausted, tired, jaded, run-down and distracted to be critical. This means that traditional critique and the

²⁹¹Ibid, p. 21

²⁹²Ibid, p. 22

²⁹³Ibid, pp. 22-3

²⁹⁴Ibid, pp. 34-5.

Critical Theories we have thus far discussed, are not sufficient anymore to have any subversive potential. “*Exhausted, depressed, solitary individuals*”, Han writes, “*cannot be molded into a revolutionary mass.*” This implies that: “[*burn-out and revolution are mutually exclusive.*” For Han, there is no alienation through labor as Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer the like argued (albeit in different ways and with different focus). Instead, Han writes, “*we submerge ourselves euphorically in work until we burn out.*” For Han, this is exactly why neoliberalism is so stable and finds so little opposition to it.²⁹⁵

According to Han these developments can also be explained in reference to the shifts that we have made from late capitalism, to neo-liberal capitalism. As we have seen, we have shifted from material to immaterial modes of production. This makes neoliberal capitalism ever more efficient, since immaterial modes of production can be exploited endlessly. This exploitation is also hard to oppose, since there is no more solidarity, since “*the current mode of production is the solitude of the isolated, lonely self-entrepreneur.*”²⁹⁶ Furthermore we have seen some limits to the critical potential of Han’s theory, since it is as Eurocentric as the Critical Theories Allen for this reason problematized. If Han’s critique is to have potential, it perhaps should undergo the same decolonialization efforts as the critical theories discussed above.

In the following and final chapter, we will explore how meta-modernists argue these shifts in Western capitalist societies have changed our cultural logics that are expressed in structures of feelings that respond to these developments. It is underneath these structures that critique now manifests itself. Critique thus now expresses itself on an affective level and we have yet to find a vocabulary for developing a theoretical, intellectual critique.

²⁹⁵ Han, 2015, in: https://www.schirn.de/en/magazine/context/why_revolution_is_no_longer_possible_today/

²⁹⁶ Ibid

Chapter II. Critique In a (Post)-Cynical and Exhausted Society

In the previous part we have seen that critique has undergone major transformation throughout the ages, especially from modernity onwards. With the Enlightenment we have seen that philosophers such as Kant and Hegel had an immensely optimistic belief in the emancipatory power of knowledge, the development of which would make us increasingly free. With the atrocities of the 20th century, and the rise of neoliberal capitalism we have entered a cynical age where no belief in an alternative to the contemporary order can be conceived of. Besides cynicism, we saw that the Eurocentric character of Critical Theory has undermined its credibility. When looking at the contemporary techniques of power, we have seen that the current economic, neoliberal order has not only succeeded to coopt all forms of critique, but has also resulted in a subjectivity where all anger and aggressiveness is internalized, leaving external forms of domination intact, and to some extent even unnecessary. We have seen this is especially the case in Western capitalistic countries. We have also argued that this diagnosis for this reason, however, is as Eurocentric as Critical Theory is. We argued the developed world is still externally exploited, making Adorno and Horkheimer's theory applicable to address these forms of domination and exploitation. In short, critique has lost most of its potential due to cynical reason, or exhaustion resulting from self-exploitation and the cooptation and neutralization of critique by neoliberal techniques of power, making it difficult to envision alternatives to the contemporary order. We have argued this is especially problematic because of the catastrophic risks that the 21st century will face us with.

When we want to address these, it will be necessary to develop a new critique for which we will need to find alternative ways of thinking, imagining and acting, things that are impeded by the current neoliberal economic order. Since we have so far discussed the impediments to critique intellectually, we will look at impediments to our imagination. We will address the impediments to our imagination by looking at Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*²⁹⁷ in the first part of the chapter. Additionally, we will see how culture responds to developments and shifts in neoliberal capitalist societies on an affective level. We will see that even on an affective, cultural level, there are cynical responses to the current socio-economic hegemony. However, there is also potential for critique to be derived from our affectivity, as we will see with Laura Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*. In the last part of the chapter we will look at the field of meta-modernism and investigate how critique is expressed in structures of feeling. We will see how cultural logics respond to the shifts in Western capitalist society that we are witnessing today and which we also looked into with Han. When the forms these shifts have resulted in remain in check, we will argue, our catastrophic risks will only increase. For this reason we will try to suggest possibilities for transforming the structures of feelings into a critical vocabulary, by looking where moral indignation and cries for justice might be translated in a critical discourse. In the first part we saw how critique always responds to some type of impeding or immanent crisis. For this purpose we will look at how critique through our cultural logics and structure of feelings respond to contemporary crisis. We will assess how critique complements this with a critical discourse. As we will see, critique even in an affective form is a response to catastrophic risks and the economic apparatus remains the target.

²⁹⁷ 2009

II.I Catastrophic consciousness in our culture and aesthetics

According to Mark Fisher we see that our imagination in late capitalist society is permeated by catastrophic phantasies about our future. We see this in multiple media, Fisher shows, from novels to movies and tv-shows. What is characteristic about the dystopic societies that are depicted in the media of the late 20th and beginning of the 21st century is that capitalism remains in check and has even taken on more extreme forms in comparison to how it functions now. This leads Fisher to conclude, with reference to Slavoj Žižek, that for some reason it has become easier to imagine the end of the world, than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. Somehow we are able to imagine a world that has been destroyed by global warming, artificial intelligence or by some combination of the two, but not a world with a different socio-economic order. It is quite imaginable that this only worsens our cynicism and that it is only logical that some people respond in a nihilistic, hedonic or ironic way to such developments. Cynicism not only permeates our consciousness and thinking, but also our imagination and affects. According to Fisher this adds to the normalization of all crisis, creating a “*situation in which the repealing of measures brought in to deal with an emergency becomes unimaginable.*” The disasters depicted in dystopic movies do not act as “*narrative pretext for the emergence of different ways of living.*” Indeed, the worlds that are depicted in such movies or series are extrapolations and exacerbations of our current order, meaning that they do not help us imagine an alternative.²⁹⁸ We need only think of popular sci-fi movies and series like *Elysium*, *Altered Carbon*, *The Expanse*, both *Blade Runner* installments and *Children of Men* to see how in these societies capitalism is still as exploitative and coercive as it is now, or even in worse degrees. These types of movies make us believe that “[a]ction is pointless; only senseless hope makes sense.” We cannot imagine alternatives to this, according to Fisher, since the hope that something new could come is transformed in the conviction that nothing new will ever happen.²⁹⁹ This resonates the point Sloterdijk made about there being no room for optimism when the current hegemony is perceived as unshakeable, and even necessary. This lack of imagination is what Fisher calls *Capitalist Realism*.³⁰⁰ According to him, the power this has over us is due to how capitalism has succeeded to subsume and consume all of previous history and because it has succeeded in ascribing monetary value to everything, leaving us reduced to nothing more than consumers and spectators. We have for this reason made the shift from belief to aesthetics and from engagement to spectatorship.³⁰¹

What makes capitalist realism further effective is that it presents itself as our shield “*from the perils posed by belief itself.*” This is exactly why the ironic distance that is characteristic of postmodern capitalism, as is expressed in our cultural logic “*is supposed to immunize us against the seductions of fanaticism.*” We are told to lower our expectations, which we should consider as only a small price to pay “*for being protected from terror and totalitarianism.*” In reference to Alain Badiou, Fisher adds that all existence now is evaluated in terms of money alone, which is additionally presented as ideal. Indeed, it is often argued, better to live in an imperfect democracy with profoundly growing inequalities and an unjust capitalistic system, than to live under any other ideology. Any hope or perspective on an alternative is then considered to be a dangerous illusion.³⁰² This of course again resonates with what we have

²⁹⁸ Fisher, 2009, pp. 1-2

²⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 3

³⁰⁰ Ibid, pp. 1-2

³⁰¹ Ibid, p. 5

³⁰² Ibid

already seen with Sloterdijk.

Even if optimism would be called for, this might only manifest itself in a cruel form, since hopes of equality and the mitigation of catastrophic risks might prove to be hopelessly naïve. Lauren Berlant calls this *cruel optimism*, which consists in desiring something that is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. This for instance happens when people become attached to good-life-fantasies that are far out of their reach, or when we hope for a world where all catastrophic risks of global warming and artificial intelligence are mitigated. Our optimism becomes cruel when we become attached to things that might now prove to be unattainable, or indeed, unimaginable. What fantasies for the good life can survive, asks Berlant, when we live in an age of precariousness, social fragmentation, with uneven expansion of economic opportunity, a lack of (upward) social mobility or when we are too cynical (or, with Han, simply too exhausted and with Adorno and Horkheimer too distracted) to strive for structural transformation? When we see so many crises, then adjustment to what seems inevitable becomes to be seen as an accomplishment.³⁰³ This is why of course Stoicism and Buddhism are gaining so much traction with people, it helps us live on amidst ongoing crisis and loss.³⁰⁴

According to Berlant, the phantasies about the good life we see depicted in other types of aesthetics make it even seem thrive with “*archaic expectations about having and building a life.*” These beliefs have become archaic, says Berlant, due to ongoing crisis, expressed in the genre of crisis within aesthetics in which “*the present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another. The genre of crisis is itself a heightening interpretive genre, rhetorically turning an ongoing condition into an intensified situation in which extensive threats to survival are said to dominate the reproduction of life.*”³⁰⁵ In other words, we see an aesthetics of precarity. According to Berlant, organized capitalism overwhelms us in such a way that even ordinary lives will seem unattainable. This is why Berlant’s main purpose is to ascertain “*what happens to persons and populations as an effect of catastrophic impacts.*”³⁰⁶ Like meta-modernists, she looks for clues in our aesthetics.

Against the background of catastrophic risks, Berlant tries to see the lifeworld of contemporary people leading ordinary lives “*as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine. Catastrophic forces take shape in this zone and become events within history as it is lived.*” We could argue like meta-modernists do – as we will see later – Berlant conceives of a return of historicity.

When it comes again to aesthetics, Berlant argues that even when people are overwhelmed by crisis, they still “*comfort themselves with stories about beating the system or being defeated by it.*” Berlant’s work was part a response to the crisis, where she sees the cause of our crisis appearing in the forms of “*class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political, and social brittleness that have increased progressively since the Reagan era.*” According to Berlant, these and other crisis situations will increasingly affect the ordinary existence for more kinds of people.³⁰⁷

With Fisher we see a far less optimistic hope for new sociality and interruptive actions,

³⁰³ Berlant, 2011, pp. 1-6

³⁰⁴ Which led Slavoj Žižek to claim that capitalism loves Buddhism. See:

<https://speculativenonbuddhism.com/2011/05/04/slavoj-zizek-heresy-western-buddhism-and-the-fetish/>

³⁰⁵ Berlant, 2011, p. 7

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 9

³⁰⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 10-1

also due the coopting nature of neoliberalism, which he sees as “*a monstrous infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact.*”³⁰⁸

The malaise that nothing new will emerge can be seen as the end of historicity, expressed also by Francis Fukuyama’s Hegelian thesis on the end of history, leaving neoliberal capitalism imbedded in our cultural consciousness as the only possibility, for which no alternative can be imagined, leading to an age that has a dangerous mood of irony towards itself and also a more dangerous cynical, detached spectatorialism that entirely replaces any engagement and involvement. The failure of the future this has led to, seems to be the cultural logic of contemporary times, leading to a sense of exhaustion and cultural and political sterility.³⁰⁹ The inability to imagine anything that capitalism cannot colonize is expressed in how capitalism “*seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable. It consequently pre-formats every formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes.*”³¹⁰ The ‘realism’ this has led to, expresses itself in the death of the social that stems from economic instability. Any ‘authentic’ form of counter-conduct or resistance has no potential, since especially authenticity has become highly marketable. Since every outrage or interest is circumvented, we are left with desensitization.³¹¹

Fisher does not seem to have had much hope for undermining capitalism through cultural logics. On the contrary, certain anti-capitalist gestures in (pop)culture even reinforce capitalism. In movies also mentioned above, it are usually the big corporations that are evil. Mega-corporations are often depicted as responsible for catastrophes like environmental disaster, oppression, slavery or poverty. The irony that is expressed in some of these movies, tends to feed rather than challenge capitalism. More dangerously, the films mentioned above perform anti-capitalism or emancipation for us, making us inter-passive “*allowing us to continue to consume with impunity.*”³¹² Since massive amounts of money is made out of movies that carry an anti-capitalist, or even emancipatory message in them, we might even say that critique as such becomes part of the culture industry, yet another thing to be profited from, and thus utilizable for capitalistic ends.

What capitalism does by making use of the culture industry in this way, according to Fisher, is creating an ironical distance, making the operation of capitalism stronger. The post-ideological consciousness this leads to, also according to Žižek - to whom Fisher refers -, is that of cynicism. Even if in our ironical distance we do the things that we actually do not take seriously, we are still doing them.³¹³ Our ironical distance is only a coping mechanism to live with the fact that we are complicit in planetary networks of oppression.

What capitalism also tries to convince us of, is that poverty can simply be ended by individual charitable behavior, “*without the need for any kind of political solution or systematic reorganization.*” Ethical immediacy, it is argued, replaces the need for political change. This sense of ethical behavior is perpetuated in the fantasy “*that western consumerism, far from being intrinsically implicated in systematic global inequalities, could itself solve them. All we have to do is buy the right products.*”³¹⁴

Fisher states the above results in something like a pervasive atmosphere, “*conditioning not*

³⁰⁸ Fisher, 2009, p. 6

³⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 6-7

³¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 8-9

³¹¹ Ibid, pp. 10-11

³¹² Ibid, p.12

³¹³ Ibid, p. 13

³¹⁴ Ibid, p. 15

only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.” This can remind us of what Adorno and Horkheimer showed, that the economic apparatus and culture industry inhibit imaginative thought and action. Due to the fact that capitalism succeeds in presenting itself as an unshakeable hegemony, any moral critique to it only enforces it. When arguing it leads to suffering, poverty, famine and war, it portrays them as inevitable parts of reality. Any hope for the alleviation of this suffering is usually refuted as naïve utopianism.³¹⁵ The catastrophes that capitalism is complicit in causing are explained away as inevitable, or as something that needs to be averted through individual consumer choices.³¹⁶ The conclusion we can draw from this, is that critique to capitalism manifests itself in our culture, but since it makes us interpassive and even more cynical about it, it does not really undermine the current hegemony.

Above we saw that our aesthetics, culture and media respond to developments in capitalist society, especially to neoliberalism and the catastrophic risks we might be faced with in the 21st century. With Fisher, we saw how even in our imagination cynicism is manifest. With Berlant we saw a catastrophic consciousness, yet with more hopes of working on a more optimistic and hopeful way of being. In the next paragraph we will discuss how meta-modernists see transformations in critique through our structures of feelings.

II.II Meta-modernism: a new cultural logics in response to impeding catastrophes

Meta-modernism, as defined by Robin van den Akker and Tim Vermeulen, is a discourse that oscillates between a modern enthusiasm (which we saw during the Enlightenment) and a postmodern irony (as discussed above).³¹⁷ According to them, meta-modernism *“is a structure of feeling that emerges from, and reacts to the postmodern as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today’s stage of global capitalism.”*³¹⁸ Meta-modernism sets out *“to comprehend what it means to experience and live in the twenty-first century.”* It is an oscillation that moves between modern and premodern feelings, like *“irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity [.]”*³¹⁹

The current developments and shifts in Western capitalist societies call for a need for a new vocabulary. As we saw above, it is claimed that we have reached the end of history, since all deepest longings of mankind are fulfilled, or so the argument of Fukuyama goes. Later Fukuyama himself realized, however, that democratic governments *“all over the world increasingly failed to deliver on its promises.”*³²⁰ With the rise of political extremism, the shrinking of the middle classes, and the problematization of free speech due to social media, we see that enough big questions remain to be asked. The turn of the millennium, Van den Akker and Vermeulen argue, marks a return of History after the End of History. Due to the above addressed questions, and all the catastrophic risks we are faced with, an increasing awareness is growing *“across culture that there is something at stake.”* We are however, not yet immediately sure what this might be. This is what they think we find expressed in our contemporary cultural production and political discourse.³²¹

Meta-modernism, as defined, is a response to postmodernism. Postmodernism’s sense of

³¹⁵ Ibid, p. 16

³¹⁶ Ibid, p. 18

³¹⁷ Van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2010, p. 1

³¹⁸ Van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2017, p. 5

³¹⁹ Ibid, p. 11

³²⁰ Ibid, p. 1

³²¹ Ibid, p. 2

the end has lost its inaptness and ineptness when it comes to coming to terms with our current, changed social situation, argue Van den Akker and Vermeulen. According to them, this is expressed in our current critical discourse, as well as in the popular imagination.

Postmodernism has lost its critical value “*when it comes to understanding contemporary arts, culture, aesthetics and politics.*” As opposed to Fisher, van den Akker and Vermeulen show there are not only cynical and ironic responses to late capitalism; instead, we see a new language is needed to explain the experience in our daily lives, one that can explain contemporary dominant ways of feeling, doing and thinking. These can all be seen as responses to recent reconfigurations of Western capitalist societies. They hope this helps us to understand what can be done and thought, but also what remains to be done and thought.³²²

In order to do so, it is necessary to chart the dominant cultural logic beneath the mentioned developments. They therefore seek out “*productive contradictions, simmering tensions, ideological formations and (...) frightening developments* [such as xenophobic populism].”³²³

Since we witness a return of Historicity according to van den Akker and Vermeulen, the dialectic that allegedly came to a standstill, we now see returning since, “*the current historical moment evokes the sense that the dialectic is once more in motion or, indeed, as its unstable nature, in constant oscillation, continuously overcoming and undermining hitherto fixed or consolidated positions.*”³²⁴ The meta-modern structure of feeling, in this sense, is “*a dialectical movement that identifies with and negates – and hence, overcomes and undermines – conflicting positions, while being never congruent with these positions.*”³²⁵

In our contemporary cultural logics that respond to these developments, we see structures of feelings emerge, which “*is a sentiment, or rather still a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down.*”³²⁶

The return of History here is seen that as a structure of feeling with a social quality, which is historically distinct from other qualities. For van den Akker and Vermeulen we see a new sense of earnestness and hope replacing the postmodern, cynical attitude towards reality. Whereas the latter also forms itself against the background of individualism, now we see a with-ness, or amongst others return.³²⁷ This might deliver us from post-postmodern bankruptcy and take us “*into the realms of a renewed pathos, ethos and logos.*” Within culture, argue van den Akker and Vermeulen, we see a search for a new position, one that tries to reconcile the postmodern with the pre-postmodern and humanistic elements. Beyond the cynical individualism, we see a new mood emerge of possibilities for connection. This helps us to resignify the present and reimagine a future, where such was claimed to be impossible by thinkers as Sloterdijk and Fisher alike.³²⁸

The developments meta-modernism has to respond to, according to van den Akker and Vermeulen, are all the financial crises that have inaugurated new forms of neoliberalisation, the deepening, institutionalized drive towards more financial instability, economic inequality, labor precarity and ecological disaster.³²⁹ Much like Adorno formulated, critique should still consist of some form of catastrophe avoidance.

³²² Ibid, pp. 3-4

³²³ Ibid, pp. 5-6

³²⁴ Ibid, p. 6

³²⁵ Ibid, p. 10

³²⁶ Ibid, p. 7

³²⁷ Ibid, p. 8

³²⁸ Ibid, pp. 9-10

³²⁹ Ibid, p. 12

In the 21st century, a new dialectics could help us deal with techno-economic cultural and institutional change needed to address economic inequalities and democratic deficits. The structure of feelings that we now see, respond to networked modes of organization, and we see *“grievances over global and, increasingly, national economic inequalities and a dissatisfaction with a political elite who foreclosed any democratic means to address these frustrations as they clung to the neoliberal consensus in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis.”* Within these developments, we see a growing group of people disaffected with neoliberal globalization and outrage at the failures of representative democracy.³³⁰ Additionally, now that it starts to sink in that human induced climate change is causing increasing catastrophic risks, humanity seems to become aware of its destructive nature.³³¹

Like Han, van den Akker and Vermeulen point out the fourth technological leap that is being made by immaterial and creative forms of labor, forms that are now exploited through an inverted class war. These developments occur amidst staggering levels of income and wealth inequality and unsustainable consumer’s debt. In short, the neoliberal path is leading us to a cluster of catastrophes of world-historical proportions *“in which wealth is concentrated at the top 1 per cent of the pyramid, while rising sea levels and super storms crumble its base, where the rest of us reside in highly precarious conditions.”*³³²

According to van den Akker and Vermeulen, the above developments are conducive to some sense of an end. This stems from two mutations in capitalism. First, a globalized world market under US hegemony and second a completed incorporation of culture by the commodity logic³³³, as we have also seen with Adorno, Horkheimer and Fisher. This sense of an end for a long time blocked any historical imagination, or an imagination of the future. This made people seek recourse in a postmodern comfort zone of ironic detachment. It became impossible, or even unnecessary to imagine an alternative. The sense of an end also and the disappearance of historicity made it impossible to learn anything from history. If we are to formulate a new critique to deal with the challenges of the 21st century, we must move beyond this postmodern predicament of cynicism, ironic detachment, lack of involvement and individualized exhausted depressive state. In the closing paragraph of this chapter we will therefore look at some possibilities for a new critique.

II.III Towards a new collective critical consciousness in our thinking, imagination and feelings

Throughout the thesis we have seen how critique has manifested itself, transformed, change direction and lose its potential. We have seen how critique first was bound up with rationality and knowledge and seen as a motor for emancipation and progress. Centuries later, critique slowly but surely started to lose its potential and meaning. Critique came to be confronted with many challenges, became suspect, and eventually sunk into cynicism. Although challenges to critique changed along the transformations critique itself made, we can see some patterns when we overview the content of this thesis. Since for critique thinking is of importance, we have seen that independent and philosophical thinking has been nullified by multiple factors. With Adorno and Horkheimer we saw that calculating, instrumental rationality as utilized by the economic apparatus has sought to fully coopt and eliminate any intellectual activity that is not amenable to appropriation by the economic apparatus, whereas

³³⁰ Ibid, pp. 12-3

³³¹ Ibid, p. 14

³³² Ibid, p. 17

³³³ Ibid, pp. 20-1

with Han we saw that 21st century digital communicative and surveillance technologies (through the a-perspective economic panopticon) sought to fully replace thinking as negation and contemplative activity and replace it in total by data and the correlative way of thinking that is inherent to it. For a new critique, we therefore have to attempt to find new ways of thinking. For this purpose, Adorno and Horkheimer saw a separate role for philosophy “*which aims to resist the negative course of the world [and therefore] must beware of secretly wishing to submit to scientific standards.*”³³⁴ Philosophy for them, as such, is a form of thinking that “*refuses to capitulate to the prevailing division of labor and does not accept prescribed tasks.*” Philosophy, thus escaping suggestion and determination, can “*protect intellectual and actual freedom.*” It is, additionally, able to detect the lies domination brings with it.³³⁵ It thus becomes clear that for Adorno and Horkheimer it is philosophy as a negating and autonomous practice that can and should inform critique. An impediment to that, as we have seen above, is that the economic hegemony blocks and annuls this form of intellectual activity. We have to therefore circumvent this, for which Han also makes some suggestions.

For Han, a revitalization of contemplative thinking, but also critical thinking is necessary to oppose the correlative way of thinking of Big Data. Big Data suggests absolute knowledge by quantifying and measuring everything. It suggests to find everything that can be correlated. Human behavior as such has to be made secure and predictable. A new era of knowledge thus dawns.³³⁶ The subject as a consequence becomes even more of a calculable and measurable entity than Adorno and Horkheimer feared, and instrumental reason and rationality has reached a new peak, and becomes an instrument of domination even more. With Big Data, correlations replace causality. The what fully replaces the why. Data thus drives out all the spirit from knowledge.³³⁷

For a solution, Han goes back to Hegel, to whom this form of knowledge would be absolute non-knowledge. The correlation is only the most primitive state of knowledge. A correlation is nothing more than a relation of probability and not of necessity. Causation, the next level, is still not the highest form of knowledge, it only implies the more complex relation of cause and effect. Only through understanding knowledge is brought forth. Han urges us to revitalize a narrative form of knowledge. The inference that is characteristic of understanding is narrative in form, and no summing up. The theory is thus a narrative form of knowledge. An inference only leads to understanding when the beginning and the end of a process is brought under a meaningful connection, when it constitutes a meaningful unity. For this, contemplation is needed, for which the accelerated world of digital calculation has no place. If all that is reasonable is an inference, then Big Data ushers in an era without reason.³³⁸ For Han, we must therefore seek a contemplative form of thinking, which can leave room for negation, the need to stop certain developments. For this, Han also sees a role for anger. Anger gives us the ability to interrupt a situation and let a new one begin. As such, it has critical potential. When there is room for contemplation, it is also of importance to exchange thoughts that are the result of contemplation within a plural community if we are to create something new. The search for the good life that also Berlant speaks of, is in need of contemplative attention. For this we have to escape our situation of ‘being too wired to focus’. All this, hopefully leads to a true understanding of our predicament, and reflective

³³⁴Adorno & Horkheimer, 2007, p. 243

³³⁵Ibid, p. 202

³³⁶ Han, 2014, p. 71

³³⁷ Ibid

³³⁸ Ibid, pp. 73-4

consciousness of where our current moral indignation is coming from. For critique, the formulation of a theory that is narrative is necessary to find new ways of thinking. This, hopefully, might pave the way to think about alternatives.

Another impediment for contemporary critique that must be overcome, is our lack of sociality. With both Adorno, Horkheimer and Han we have seen the problems of the fragmentation of the social. For this reason, we have to escape the individualism that is rampant currently.

According to Han, again, the exhaustive, depressive state people have come to suffer from, is a lonely one and therefore isolates people. The social ability of people to express their thoughts and exchange them, is entirely burned away. The depressiveness this culminates in, is an individual one that makes people lonely and isolated. The exhaustion of people extends to such a degree that the ability to express or speak is fully burned away. This form of exhaustion is so violent that it makes any community, every togetherness and proximity impossible. The social fragmentation Han identifies, is a problem that is diagnosed by other thinkers we have discussed in this thesis as well. Therefore, to develop a new critique, a new form of togetherness has to be invented, where contemplative thinking and the exchange of thoughts can have room again. For this we have to find new grounds for solidarity. Opposed to the form of tiredness that ensues in discord, Han speaks of reconciling tiredness of solidarity. This form of tiredness creates an interspace. This allows us to see otherness, and that otherness becomes part of us. In this interspace, friendliness exists as a form of indifference. Because the ego shrinks, the gravity can shift from the *I* to the world. A tiredness arises that trusts itself to the world, while the depressive I-tiredness is a single-tiredness, that excludes and repels the outside world. Here, tiredness is thus not just something bad, the fundamental tiredness is something else than the depressive exhaustion-tiredness. In the former, inspiration also lies which is aimed at not-doing. This inspiration does not say what we have to do, but what we can let be.³³⁹ It also allows for a different form of attention, opposed to the hyper-attention that is inherent in the economy of efficiency and acceleration. Due to the friendliness that is inherent in this form of tiredness, new possibilities for solidarity arise, namely the possibility of a we-tiredness where we are tired together, as opposed to the depressive exhaustion-depression that makes it impossible to do something, we-tiredness has a negative potentiality of not-doing. This we-tiredness makes it possible to annul the individuality of the ego-logic and to found a new community.³⁴⁰ This could help address the mental health plague that is currently exhausting so many people.

As we saw, not only our rational critical consciousness is threatened, but also our imagination and affective lives, as we saw with Berlant and meta-modernism. In order to address the discussed crisis and catastrophes Berlant seeks a collectively invested form of life, by creating an aesthetic that moves beyond the ones portrayed above, in order to create a dialogue about hope, optimism and happiness. For Berlant this is reason to search for a new optimism that manifests itself “*in attachments and the desire to sustain them: attachment is a structure of relationality.*” Berlant seeks to find the conditions under which such attachments might be possible. Berlant for this reason takes recourse in critical theories and follows Adorno in what he calls “*it could have been otherwise*” form of commitment.³⁴¹

Like meta-modernists, Berlant is concerned with the affective responses that people thus

³³⁹ Han, 2014 pp. 44-5

³⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 47-8

³⁴¹ Berlant, 2011, p. 11

have since they exemplify shared historical time. She argues that our historical consciousness also consists of an affective component, and does not only express itself rationally like with Hegel. In our current historical affectivity, she argues, we can trace the dissolution of good-life-fantasies, which registers the conditions of life “*that move across persons and worlds, play out in live time and energize attachments.*” In pinpointing these attachments, a shared atmosphere could become possible again and we could create a theory-in-practice of how the world works, in order to influence it. A theory like this would ideally pursue “*conceptually the question of how people maintain their bindings to modes of life that threaten their well-being, and to do this it recasts the object of desire not as a thing (or even a relation) but as a cluster of promises magnetized by a thing that appears as an object but is really a scene in the psychoanalytic sense.*”³⁴² For her this is a way to address precariousness, crisis, catastrophes and the like, in order to create (self)interruptive gestures.³⁴³

According to meta-modernists, we have to try to ascertain where critique might be lurking beneath our cultural logics, expressed in structures of feelings. For them, analysis and criticism of contemporary aesthetics can be helpful for this goal. This consists in an intellectual labor with which we can find out where exactly structures of feelings are expressed within a community. They show that we usually find this in expressions of a “we” as a generation, or community, that pertains to a certain sociohistorical moment. The structures of feeling, according to them, is usually expressed in an affective, or tonal logic. They therefore look amongst contemporary cultural expressions in novels, film, literature and more to find where we see new, critical structures of feelings emerge. Since meta-modernism is a response to the enthusiastic modern, and cynical postmodern, they look for clues in culture where we see interchanges between irony and earnestness, detachment and involvement, amused distance and affectionate sympathy, naïveté and knowingness.³⁴⁴ Meta-modernists show, in the films that they analyze, that we see precursors of something like an attitude of emotional and intellectual commitment³⁴⁵, which Han for instance fears to see lacking. According to them, whereas Fisher argued every utopian thinking is refuted as being sheer naïveté, now we see utopian wish-fulfillment coming back in our cultures. Indeed, there is now more than only cynical, dystopic depictions of futures in our culture. On the contrary, the films that meta-modernists analyze, are sometimes characterized by radical refusing of despair.³⁴⁶ We see the creation of a sense of community, that bind together to achieve the once thought impossible. A connectedness with others is portrayed, infusing the heart of the social realm with new breath. The inclusivity we see, goes beyond the individualism that Han and Fisher so much feared. In our culture, we now move beyond “*the mere celebration of social instability, diffusion and negativity (...) and that there must also be a place for the possibility of collective [utopianism].*” We thus now see “*defiant affirmation, commitment and sincere engagement in the face of an implicitly acknowledged potential for despair, disillusionment of ironic detachment.*”³⁴⁷ In the culture meta-modernists analyze, we can thus see some optimism regarding the return of sociality, solidarity, engagement and involvement.

³⁴² Ibid, p. 16

³⁴³ Ibid, p. 18

³⁴⁴ Van den Akker & Vermeulen, 2017, pp. 28-30

³⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 34

³⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 36

³⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 37 & 39. See for an analysis of the movies they analyze the entirety of chapter two of their book of its first part.

Of course, critique should always be aimed at emancipating the oppressed. Therefore, a sociological inquiry on what subjects are now particularly dominated and exploited by is called for. For this purpose we can look at the work of Boltanski on emancipation, where he argues that in order to make a critical theory inclusive and emancipatory, it has to be given sociological content. According to Boltanski, there is always a relationship between the dominated and dominant within a society, where the latter often exclude the former from social orders. The basis for critique, is then to identify contradictions within these social orders, of which the next step will be to change relations of domination in such a way that previously excluded parties are included in the social order in a socially justifiable way. What Boltanski also argues, is that we must view excluded parties as capable of reflexivity and moral judgements themselves and see them in some instances as form of critique. Only when excluded parties are taken seriously in such a way, can we begin to include them by taking action upon their critiques.³⁴⁸ Sociology then comes in when it offers a critical theory of domination in borrowing on the critiques mentioned throughout the thesis. The reality that is called into question from marginalized, dominated parties can then be given social scientific robustness and representation, which can then serve to provide a theoretical framework, as well as normative grounds which can help in arguing why indeed reality is rendered unacceptable by some, which can ultimately be used for the purpose of emancipation.³⁴⁹ One instance where this could be applied is exploitation. Often this refers *“to the way a small number of people make use of differentials in order to extract profit at the expense of the great majority.”*³⁵⁰ The purpose of domination, argues Boltanski, is often precisely this. Critical philosophy and sociology can then help to expose the social conditions that make this possible, thereby at the same time discovering means by which these conditions can be stopped or changed.³⁵¹ More generally, the role of critique, says Boltanski, consists *“in showing how the existing social order does not allow members, or some of them, fully to realize the potentialities constitutive of their humanity.”* This way of thinking can contribute to an inclusive form of critique. An inclusive, just society, Boltanski writes *“is one without leftovers and the existing social order can be criticized in as much as it excludes, oppresses, scorns and so on, a greater or lesser number of its members, or simply prevents them from realizing what they are capable of as human beings.”*³⁵²

Above we have also dealt with decolonialization. As we saw, Allen argued we have to include marginalized and excluded others in our intersubjective rationality, discourse and governmental action if we are to make progress in a more humane way. Allen as such makes us aware of the importance of decolonializing both our theoretical frameworks, as well as our economy if we are to strive for more inclusive prosperity.

Hamid Dabashi, in his book *Can Non-Europeans Think?*³⁵³ makes a similar argument. He argues that we have to de-racialize and decolonialize our thinking by expanding our intellectual canon and academia by offering more ground for non-Western intellectuals and philosophies. This is necessary if we are to develop new, critical, inclusive ways of thinking. If we want to be inclusive, Dabashi argues, we have to de-universalize our philosophical legacy, by allowing a place for non-Western philosophies which are up to now denied a place

³⁴⁸ Boltanski, 2011, pp. 2-3

³⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 4-5

³⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 8-9

³⁵¹ Ibid

³⁵² Ibid, p. 10

³⁵³ 2015

through imperial power. Many philosophies are predicated on “*denying others the capacity to think critically or creatively by way of enabling, authorizing, and empowering themselves to think for the world.*”³⁵⁴ As we saw with Levinas, the universalizing tendency within Western thinking is made possible by virtue of exclusion of the other. With his critique on traditional Western philosophy, Levinas exposes an egotistical way of thinking, which he calls ‘egology’ that has no place for the Other, because it excludes and even annihilates him. The totalizing, or universalizing way of thinking, can only constitute itself and exist by virtue of exclusion of the other. Time and again, cruelty in history repeats itself because we are unable to deal with the other in an ethical responsible way, according to Levinas. When constituting a society on this way of thinking, a relationship is made on the basis of reciprocity between parties, whereby third parties are excluded.³⁵⁵ Striving for the prosperity of one continent, nation or community, might then risk resulting in the exclusion of a third party that calls for justice. A just society, therefore, must also answer to the appeal for justice of the third excluded party.³⁵⁶ Levinas situates rightness and justice in terms of a proximity to our neighbor. And being within proximity, means being in the presence of a *face*.³⁵⁷ Social justice means “*to compare unique and incomparable others*”³⁵⁸, implying we must expend our scope of comparison as far as we can. The demand of justice, Levinas argues, is made within a plurality, where everything falls within the responsibility of the *I*.³⁵⁹ Levinas goes as far to argue that knowledge starts with the demand for justice, he writes: “[a]n *objectivity born of justice and founded on justice, and thus required by the for-the-other, which, in the alterity of the face, commands the I.*”³⁶⁰ So it is the alterity of the other that makes us aware of a call for justice. And since thinking, according to Levinas, should include the Other, we should be as inclusive as we can. As we saw with Allen Enlightened thinking is quite Eurocentric. This means that every question about justice and suffering risks only amounting to Europe and its civilization and to a neglecting of everything outside of the West, in particular the developing world. We saw how the critical theories discussed in this thesis sometimes carries this danger in them. It is therefore important to heed Adorno’s message not only regarding the importance to avoid catastrophes, but also to truly strive for ‘a sharing of the world’ that is aimed at reconciliation, a non-totalizing form of being together and diversity, where the call of justice of the Other is answered and where we use our thinking and acting to reach a more emancipated world.

³⁵⁴ Dabashi, 2015, p. 259

³⁵⁵ Levinas, 1998, p. 19

³⁵⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 166-7

³⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 165

³⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 166

³⁵⁹ *Ibid*

³⁶⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 166-7

Conclusion

In this thesis we have attempted to offer an overview of critique as an intellectual practice and as a social phenomenon. We have aimed to show how critique is protean, in the sense that it always changes in response to the shifts and transformations of power, knowing and the economy. We have argued, that since its protean nature, critique can always manifest itself in a certain way, and have subversive effects on forms of domination and exploitation. We have seen how critique has come to permeate society in a profound way since the Enlightenment and how this sparked an optimistic belief in rationality's progressive potential. This optimism, however, became suspect when we learned how instrumental rationality not unproblematically leads to more freedom, but can even become an impediment to it. This is relevant to realize, since many contemporary (public) intellectuals believe a return or revitalization of the Enlightenment will prove to be a panacea for all our problems. If faith in science and reason is restored, they believe, science will save us from catastrophic climate change, artificial intelligence and socio-economic problems. They also believe adhering to the ideals of the Enlightenment will help us ending social injustice and other forms of contemporary and potential future suffering.³⁶¹

We have additionally seen that critique has come to be faced with many challenges and problems over especially the last century and the beginning of the 21st. One of the most profound challenges to critique, we have seen, is cynicism. We have seen how this transformed critique from a progressive, optimistic praxis bound up with rational ways of knowing, to a cynical and ironic view of the world. As we have seen, this not only impedes our thinking, but also imagination and feeling, as expressed in our postmodern, cultural logics. We have thus seen critique transform from progressivism to pessimistic cynicism.

Another challenge that we addressed, is the Eurocentric background of Critical Theory, which we sought to expose through the work of Allen. If we are to truly develop a new critique, we must include thinking of postcolonial others, and decolonialize our intellectual history. Only by doing so, can we find an inclusive way of thinking that can serve emancipatory potential.

With the work of Han, we have seen how the current exhaustive, depressive and individualistic subjectivity functions as an impediment to critique, leaving the neoliberal course and status quo unchallenged. This might even increase the catastrophic risks we are already faced with. Neoliberal capitalism is the driving force behind the growing gap between rich and poor, climate change and the development of technologies that will also prove to be dangerous. One of which is artificial intelligence. If artificial intelligence will come to serve only the rich and when only they will have access to technologies in order to improve not only their health and wellbeing, but soon also their cognitive abilities and physical strength, this will mean the gap between the rich and poor will not only be economic, cultural and personal, but even biological. What will happen, we might wonder, with those that do not have any access to these technologies? Will we treat them the same as we treat animals now? Or how our ancestors in the 19th century treated slaves?³⁶² And what might happen if artificial

³⁶¹ There is even a social and philosophical movement nowadays: Effective Altruism, that believes reason, rationality and science can help us find out how to do the most good with our available time and resources, meaning it will help us alleviate suffering effectively, as well in the present as in the (far) future.

³⁶² Cf. Harari, 2017, p. 355

intelligence makes the masses irrelevant and useless?³⁶³ The economic apparatus always used to need productive and loyal masses for it to function. Hence medicine has always been an egalitarian project, it helped people to not fall below the norm, so as to ensure they would be productive members for the economy, and effective (potential) soldiers. What if the masses will be obsolete if algorithms and machines will outperform the tasks that once were given to the masses to keep the economic apparatus going? ³⁶⁴ And what if the utilization of these technologies will even make corporations more powerful? And drive us even closer towards catastrophic climate change? If we wish to prevent worst case scenario's from materializing, critique has to play a role in order to do so. Han only discussed the risks for our democracy and freedom that Big Data and Big Finance impose on us. But also these risks must be taken into account by a new Critique.

With Fisher, Berlant and meta-modernism we have seen how we perhaps see momentum in our cultural logics and structures of feelings towards new forms of solidarity, coexistence and communities. Though a critical, theoretical vocabulary is still missing, we might derive hope from the fact that we see potential for critique growing in the expression of our structure of feeling, even in popculture. The only danger this poses, however, is that critique becomes part of the culture industry, and thereby highly profitable. Another danger is that this might make us interpassive; we will just let novels, tv-shows and films be critical for us. This is why this momentum has to be seized upon and which is why we must let our critical faculties be inspired by (pop)culture and not let it be a mere part of the culture industry. Ultimately, critique might hopefully help us to *“dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge, but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life”*³⁶⁵

³⁶³ Ibid, pp. 309-11 & 313

³⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 353-5

³⁶⁵ Foucault, 1997, quoted in Boland, 2014, p. 122

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