



Synthesis, Dynamis, Praxis: Critical Theory's ongoing search for a concept of society

Hartmut Rosa 

Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, Germany

Peter Schulz

Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, Germany

Abstract

From its beginning, Critical Theory aimed to explore the laws governing social life as a formational totality and the forces shaping and driving its historical evolution. So the attempt to develop a comprehensive conception of 'society' encompassing both its structural as well as its cultural components can be considered one of the defining hallmarks of Critical Theory through all its theoretical and generational variations. But what, then, is Critical Theory's conception of society? To answer this question, the authors make use of a three-tiered heuristic model distinguishing *synthesis* (what is society?), *dynamis* (what are the driving forces of social change?) and *praxis* ((how) can social change be motivated or influenced by social actors?). In this way, they are able to reconstruct not only the divergences and controversies between the different versions and approaches in Critical Theory across the four generations of authors writing in this tradition, but also four core points of convergence which can serve to differentiate between Critical Theory in the Frankfurt School tradition and other critical theories. These four points, we suggest, should be seen to form the backbone of any valid conception of society in contemporary Critical Theory.

Corresponding author:

Hartmut Rosa, Department of Sociology, Friedrich Schiller University, 07737 Jena, Germany.
Email: hartmut.rosa@uni-jena.de

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Introduction

There can be no doubt about it: From its very beginning, Critical Theory was not just based on, but also focused on the idea of society as a whole, on the economic and socio-cultural totality encompassing human life and action. To discern the forces and laws which govern and bind together the myriad forms of human action and association within a social formation has been the focus of Critical Theory all along. Hence, the refusal to take social phenomena simply at 'face value' and the attempt to identify the social logic and dynamic underlying them instead. That is, the distinction between *essence* and *appearance* in the tradition of Hegel – to whom Critical Theory is invariably linked in one way or another – should be considered one of the hallmarks of Critical Theory that distinguishes it from other approaches such as rational choice theories or middle range theories.

Of course, to pinpoint a precise definition of 'society' is just as hard for critical theorists as for anyone. Problems begin as soon as we try to distinguish one society from another in temporal and/or in territorial terms. As we have learned from Ulrich Beck, among others, to simply assume that societies are separated by national borders such that we can speak of French society or British society amounts to a highly problematic methodological nationalism (Beck, 2007), and in fact, critical theorists are much less prone to this kind of reductivism than comparative sociologists, for example. But if we take conceptions such as 'modern society', the problems don't go away: When exactly did it start? And shouldn't we distinguish between different modernities in temporal as well as in spatial terms, i.e. between early, industrial and late modernity, for example, and between Chinese, European or African? And even if we allow for all these distinctions, it remains difficult to speak of *one* society even for one country at one point in time. Take, for example, modern Indian society: If we look closely, we find that social reality is very different for, say, rich Hindu women in Chennai than it is for poor Muslim men in Kashmir, they are separated by language, gender, religion, wealth, social practices etc. so how can this be *one* society? Quite a number of social theorists now suggest that we should not just renounce macro-concepts such as 'modernity', but even the idea of society itself (Latour, 2007; Laclau, 2014). What we are left with, then, is just a multiplicity and diversity of interconnected social states and processes, which we can analyze one by one, but without a conception of their interconnectedness and 'formational logics'.

Against this trend, Critical Theory in all its variants insists that we need to keep the sense and concept of a *social formation*, that we cannot do without the notion of a social totality which encompasses social, cultural, economic and political life as a whole and has to be understood as fundamental for forms of subjectivation and hence the production of individual subjectivities. In this sense, Critical Theory always is a *theory of society*.

Across all variants and generations, it is characterized by the idea that institutions, individuals and interactions are formed and shaped by the social relations in which they

are produced and which they produce. These social relations are not simply understood as an arbitrary ensemble of countless individual relationships and interactions, but as a systematic context, a social formation with its own regularities. At the same time, however, Critical Theory is always, and from the beginning, not just an analysis, but also a *critique* of existing society. It is inspired – or even driven by – Marx’s critique of philosophy, his famous *thesis eleven*, according to which theory should not just be about understanding the world, but about changing it (Marx, 1969: 15). Critical Theory, one could say, is always formulated in the interests of individuals, repressed, oppressed or alienated by the (unjustified and ultimately unjustifiable) structures of socioeconomic or political power and domination. What emanates from this is a practical and political impulse to seek and identify such structures and to formulate routes for emancipation from them. Theory in this tradition is thus ultimately committed to the normative goal of contributing to the self-realization of all individuals through the realization of a free and truly humane society. It therefore treats society both as an obstacle and as a necessary condition of this self-realization.

As we have seen already, for critical theorists, society is understood as an ordered totality which has emergent qualities vis-à-vis institutions and individuals. It must therefore be explored by its relations; it essentially *is* process and constellation (Adorno, 2003), and at the same time, it is *immanent* to all institutions, individuals and interactions. As it is for Emile Durkheim, society for critical theorists is *not* an antonym of the individual, but rather a complementary concept. For Marx – and for poststructuralists entering the scene more than a century later – the individual can be understood as an ‘ensemble of social relations’ (Marx, 1969: 14). This starting point for Critical Theory is of fundamental importance for it implies that, contrary to theoretical schools building on methodological individualism, society cannot be analyzed as the *result* of (aggregated) individual needs, desires and (inter-) actions, but the other way round: Individual desires and subjectivities, individual characters and personalities as well as social interactions and exchanges are produced and forged through the governing laws of social relations.

As a theory of society, Critical Theory insists on the epistemological possibility of theoretically identifying and grasping the crucial features of this totality, and pinpointing its laws of development – and, on top of this, to politically re-shape and change these laws in a way conducive to normative commitment. In addition, if Critical Theory wants to be both a critical theory and a theory of society at once, it needs to analytically clarify and define the precise nature of the relationship between its analysis and its practical involvement in critique.

To lend these claims credibility, Critical Theory (as does any comprehensive theory of society) needs to answer three basic questions, which actually are the core-questions of social theory anyway. They can be labelled: *synthesis*, *dynamis* and *praxis*.¹ 1) *Synthesis*: What *is* society? That is to say: what are the crucial building blocks, the constitutive elements that produce the fabric of society? 2) *Dynamis*: What are the driving forces and mechanisms of *social change*? 3) *Praxis*: (How) can social actors deliberately (re-)shape, influence or control the course of social change and hence the structures of social reality?

This triad of questions constitutes an elaboration of the founding problem of sociology per se, which from Hobbes through Durkheim, Simmel and Parsons to Luhmann and

Latour, is the question of how (the evolution of) social order is possible in the first place (Luhmann 1981). The first of these, *synthesis*, seeks to define the fabric of which social order and hence society is made – answers given by social theory are, for example: Society is constituted by the conditions and processes of production (Marx); by the conditions of exchange (Adorno), or by the logics of language and/or communication (Habermas and Luhmann). Sociology, however, differentiates itself from political theories precisely by the discovery of the historical nature of society, i.e. by the insight made by thinkers such as Tocqueville, Rousseau, Marx and Hegel that we should not seek ‘eternal laws’ of society, since social order seems to evolve through time. Therefore, the question of the driving forces of change (*synthesis*) have been of central importance for sociology since its very beginning. Possible answers are the *evolution of spirit* (Hegel), the *growing forces of production* (Marx), *war and conflict* (Simmel, Foucault), the *inner logics of language* (Habermas), the *struggle for recognition* (Honneth) and so on. This, of course, is the point where philosophies of history are sometimes inextricably intertwined with social theory.

Another point of divergence between social theory and political theory is the awareness that society and its logics of evolution are different from, and possibly even independent of, political intentions, political shaping and forms of government in general. Sociology as a discipline starts exactly with the insight that society cannot be reduced to the state, it is not simply the result of politics. Quite to the contrary, starting again with thinkers such as Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Marx, sociology has been ignited by the idea that government is not the creator, but rather an *effect* of social structure and social evolution. This inevitably creates the problem of whether or not society can be reflexively, politically controlled, shaped or steered, and if so, *how* and to what extent (*praxis*).

From this point of view, Critical Theory no doubt always aspired to be a social theory in its fullest sense, not a political theory. Through all its generations and manifestations, it implicitly or explicitly operated on the basis of conceptions of society that provided (at least tentative) answers to all three of these questions.

With respect to the second core question (*dynamis*), it is important to note that for Critical Theory, society inevitably has to be recognized as historical and changeable. Hence, the question here is about the logic of social transformation. When it comes to the third question (*praxis*), critical theorists have always been essentially concerned with how *Critical Theory itself* could contribute to a desirable change of social conditions, judged by its own theoretically-derived normative criteria. The problem here is obviously twofold; it concerns the relationship between history and political action on the one hand, and between theory and social *praxis* on the other. Both have been highly contested in the history of Critical Theory. In fact, as we elaborate in the remainder of this paper, critical theorists of all generations have given substantially different answers to all three of the core questions. Thus, the differences and contradictions between the manifold approaches broadly labelled as Critical Theory can be most fruitfully reconstructed and discussed along these lines. By doing so, we hope to draw out the conceptual requirements for any adequate understanding of the crisis-ridden state and the dynamic forces at play in contemporary, late-modern society, and for the development of a transformative critical *praxis*.

Synthesis: The fabric of society

Which elements or processes can be defined as providing the basic conceptual unity of society, in other words: what constitutes society as such? Any possible answer to this question presupposes that society has an identifiable structural logic. And in short, the three or four generations that make up the tradition of Critical Theory can be distinguished by their definitions of this structural logic. For Karl Marx, the great ancestor of Critical Theory, what constitutes society is the fact that human beings need to work for their metabolism with nature, i.e. for their material reproduction, and that the process of production is historically evolving with differing forms of co-production and differing forms of the separation of labor. Hence, *production* is the constitutive element of the very first formulations of Critical Theory. No doubt, Horkheimer and Adorno and the first generation of critical theorists, including thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse and Friedrich Pollock, took off from this conception of society and political economy before they went on to give the logic of exchange and technological development greater emphasis than Marx had done. Thus, if society for Marx could be identified with the *conditions and laws of production*, for Adorno it was constituted by the conditions of capitalist exchange, hence as identical with the *conditions and laws of exchange*.

Nevertheless, just as with Marx, early Critical Theory understood social *synthesis* monistically; it was formed through the material reproduction of social life, through the organization of the metabolic process with nature. And of course, in modernity, this means through capitalist commodity production and distribution. For Marx, subjects (as entrepreneurs or as workers) did not figure as independent social entities; they were integrated into society simply as ‘character masks’ as it were, even when, of course, workers in particular were also physically shaped by it through material scarcity, hard manual work and rigid temporal structures. Georg Lukács later developed Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism into a theory of reification, which in turn became a central issue for Critical Theory (Brunkhorst, 1998). With this concept, he tried to understand how social *synthesis* positively includes subjects by grasping and shaping the workers’ (and entrepreneurs’) character. Critical theorists then in turn combined this conception with Marx’s idea that people’s needs are themselves shaped by society (Marx and Engels, 1969a), and with Freud’s theoretical work on psychoanalysis.

With this move, society appears to be constituted both by the processes and laws of production and exchange, and at the same time by individual subjects. Consequently, first generation critical theorists sought to explain the processes and mechanisms of a more or less frictionless integration of the latter into the former. This is what led to the formulation of theories of authoritarian personality (Adorno et.al., 2007) and of the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002), or of *Eros and Civilization* (Marcuse, 1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, 1964). In this way, Critical Theory developed an understanding of the tailor-made production of subjects by society. As (with Horkheimer and Adorno in particular) the dialectic of production and distribution – labor and exchange – strongly tilts towards exchange; class differences tend to be gradually lost from view. Nevertheless, of course, social conditions are still strongly

identified with forms of violent oppression, with an oppression that is not so much focused on subaltern social groups than on the minds and bodies of the subjects.

Yet, even with this refined social theory, where society appears to consist of a twofold psycho-cultural and economic structure, it still follows a monistic logic of evolution, or of change and development, because the two sides still appear to be firmly coupled with the one determining the other. Thus, it was Jürgen Habermas who, as the most recognized protagonist of the second generation of Critical Theory, first criticized Marx as well as Horkheimer and Adorno for being reductivist and advocated a genuinely dualistic theory of *synthesis* (Habermas, 1971). For him, society is constituted by both material as well as symbolic reproduction, and both – as systemic integration and social integration – develop more or less independent mechanisms for the integration of individuals into society. For the mature Habermas, it is no longer the logic of production or exchange that constitutes the dual core which defines the *synthesis* of society, but the logic of communication. If we seek to understand and analyze society, he argues, we need to reconstruct its *conditions of communication*. Habermas himself understood this as a ‘paradigm change’ in the basis of Critical Theory from political economy to communication theory (Habermas, 1985).

Following this, most recent strands of Critical Theory advocate a pluralist theory of *synthesis*. Most prominently, Axel Honneth has taken up Habermas’ intersubjectivist conception but given it yet another turn. For Honneth, it is not the logic of language and communication that constitutes social *synthesis*, but the dynamics of *recognition* and *misrecognition* (Honneth, 1996). The social fabric is thus constituted by the *conditions of recognition* which underly even the realm of material reproduction. Honneth, building on Hegel, Mead and Parsons, differentiates three fundamental spheres of recognition which constitute the institutional reality of modern society: the market, the family and the state. And among the protagonists of the current fourth generation of Critical Theory, Hartmut Rosa, for example, has tried to extend and reformulate this model by claiming that underlying the conditions of recognition we find more encompassing processes or axes of *resonance* – not just between human beings, but also towards material reality – such that the *conditions of resonance* would appear to constitute the core of social *synthesis* (Rosa, 2018).

Nevertheless, the relationship between material and symbolic dimensions of *synthesis* ultimately remains of central concern and is still heavily contested between critical theorists (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). But Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action* (1985) added another important dimension to Critical Theory’s reflection on the basic structure of modern society with his famous distinction between *system* and *lifeworld* and with the claim that the imperatives of the former – i.e. the processes of economic monetarization and administrative bureaucratization – have a tendency to colonize the latter and hence to undermine the conditions of symbolic-communicative reproduction. This leads to the question of if, how, and to what degree, processes of symbolic-communicative reproduction can or should be institutionalized. Unfortunately, Habermas himself in his later writings dropped the colonization thesis, and thus the debate on this topic more or less stopped in the middle of nowhere.

Yet the transition from monistic to dualistic or pluralistic theories of social *synthesis* and social formation coincided with another difference within Critical Theory, which

interestingly also finds its most clearcut expression in Habermas' colonization thesis: For thinkers of the first generation of Critical Theory, *alienation* was not just the price, but rather the *mode* of social integration for individuals such that we can almost speak of *integration through alienation*. We can see this, for example, from the culture industry chapter in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002), from Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, or from Erich Fromm's writings. More recent critical theorists writing in the vein of Habermas, Honneth or Rahel Jaeggi, by contrast, take alienation to be a social pathology that *endangers* the social integration of individuals into modern society (Jaeggi, 2018).²

Obviously, these differing interpretations of what defines the core structures of society, or of social *synthesis*, straightforwardly lead to differing forms of critique. Thus, the focus shifts from a critique of the prevailing conditions of production to a critique of the conditions of exchange, and then on to the conditions of communication, recognition and resonance. Yet, no version of Critical Theory perceives such conditions as simply given and static – as we have seen already, it is one of the defining hallmarks of this socio-philosophical tradition to think of social structures as historically changing and evolving, that is to say, not just as adaptive to environmental changes, but as *inherently* dynamic.

Dynamis: The driving motors of change

The reason for Critical Theory's basic premise that societies are inherently dynamic is the conviction that there is always a tension, or contradiction, which is built into the very core and structure of society. This contradiction underpinning social *synthesis* then leads to conflict and ongoing social struggles. For Marx, of course, the basic tension was in the contradiction between labor and capital, or between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, and the ensuing conflict was class struggle as a driving motor of history. For Adorno and Marcuse, the contradiction seems to shift towards an insurmountable tension between (instrumental) reason and nature, and thus, the central conflict takes on the shape of a struggle against nature. In Habermas, we find the contradiction between system and lifeworld leading to dynamic political struggles for the better argument. For Honneth, in turn, the struggle for recognition is based on the driving antagonism between recognition and misrecognition, whereas for Rosa, the basic contradiction is between the logic of control and domination on one side, and modes of a more mimetic resonance on the other.

These contradictions obviously go way beyond being mere opposites, since they display an inherent tendency towards a crisis-ridden, dynamic entanglement. It is these crises that form the fulcrum for the critique of social formation in Critical Theory. For Marx, the tendency for economic crisis is at the center; both the cyclical crises of capital and the tendential fall of the rate of profit are linked to material hardship and suffering for workers. Horkheimer and Adorno wrote their *magnum opus* in the immediate face of the crisis of enlightenment, and Habermas and Honneth identify pathologies of modernity as the source of individual suffering. Thus, for Critical Theory, the *dynamis* of (capitalist) society is fundamentally crisis-driven and thus dysfunctional (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 2), regardless of whether economic, political, psychological – and recently also ecological – crises are in focus. However, on closer inspection we find that there are

two structurally different forms of conflict or contradiction that divide the family of Critical Theories into two camps. Interestingly, when we ask about the driving forces of history, we find both approaches uneasily squared against each other in Marx's thinking, for example on the very first pages of the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1969b). They state that all human history is the history of class struggle but at the same time they insist that it is the progressive growth of productive forces that is ultimately (and dialectically) driving social evolution. The difference between the two approaches is that in the former version the core conflict is between different groups of the prevailing social structure of society, whereas, in the second there is a rift between social formation as a whole and a wider or outside reality that is neglected or distorted, or at least resistant to it. Thus, when for Adorno or Marcuse the struggle between instrumental reason and nature takes center stage, class struggle is somewhat downplayed and losing significance. The distinction can also be seen as the difference between *capital* (or the movement of capital) and *capitalists* as the dominant agents of social *dynamis*: With capitalists, it is a particular social class that is the locus of power which should be the target of critique and struggle, whereas with capital, all subjects are, well, *subject* to a dynamic force that drives social change. Here, the locus of power and *dynamis* is in the overall structures of society. Even if this difference seems to be only a difference of emphasis, we claim it is important to keep in mind when we ask for accounts of driving forces in Critical Theory.

What all representatives of Critical Theory have in common, nevertheless, is the sense that society is based on conflict. Whether it is class struggle, the struggle for the control of nature, the struggle for the better argument that prevails, or the struggle for recognition, society is always at least in part the product of conflict and of attempts to solve, soften or repress it, which then in turn build up the platform of new conflicts and struggles on another stage. In this sense Critical Theory is always a *theory of social conflict*. What different types of Critical Theory share in addition to this, is the insight that societies – or the dominant powers within them – develop mechanisms for the immobilization of struggle and for the invisibilization of those basic conflicts and contradictions, i.e. something like an ideological apparatus which serves to (temporarily) freeze the prevailing social conditions.

What is controversial between different critical theories is the question of whether or not historical change has a factual direction and/or a logical telos. In Marx we find the idea of a continuous growth of productive forces which changes the form of society in a dialectical process based on the recurring tension between developing forces and the historically achieved conditions of production. The direction of this process, empirically driven by class struggles and recurring revolutions, appears to be pointed to an ultimate goal of a classless society. This dialectical model of *dynamis*, taken from Hegel's philosophical conception of history, forms the basis for the first generation of Critical Theory up until as late as the 1930s. From Marx – and Hegel – its proponents adopt a theory of progress whose goal is the positive suspension (*Aufhebung*) of the given social situation. Prompted theoretically at first by Walter Benjamin's (1989) skeptical theses on history, but also empirically by the failure of the socialist revolution in central Europe and Russia, by the rise of Fascism and National Socialism, the exile situation and ultimately the Holocaust, critical theorists revised this optimism about progress and,

with Adorno, arrive at a *negative dialectic* of social development in which progress is still conceivable, but neither already achieved nor certain nor even probable in the future. In fact, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *One-Dimensional Man* provide historical accounts of modern society in which the direction of history almost appears to be reversed, with society heading towards a new state of barbarism.

Certainly, this skepticism is thoroughly reversed by second and third generation critical theorists Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth. For Habermas, progress is not necessarily an inevitable empirical fact of history, since regression is always possible, but it is a logical tendency built into the structure and nature of human language, or, more precisely, of human language practice, which is based on the giving and taking of validity claims that can be pragmatically tested and revised. Thus, Habermas' theory stands for the most *linear-evolutionary theory of dynamis*: rationalization processes increasingly realize the potentials of reason inherent in language, while conflicts play a rather subordinate role. Honneth, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of conflicts more strongly and thus once again formulates a dialectical theory of *dynamis*. For him, disregard or disrespect, social struggles for recognition, and progress in the sense of an increasing scope of institutionalized recognition, inclusion, and greater individualization, form a dialectical three-step. He and, following him, contemporary representatives of Critical Theory such as Rainer Forst (2019) and Rahel Jaeggi (2018) continue to draw on Hegel, but at the same time claim to overcome his philosophy of history by using a basically pragmatist model of learning. They thus formulate a *positive-dialectical theory of dynamis* that is not historically determined but has a recognizable direction of progress.

In the light of postcolonial critiques and based on insights of psychoanalysis, Amy Allen has recently challenged this optimistic conception of historical progress and argued for a more cautious approach in which progress is possible in principle (forward-looking progress), but not built into any direction of historical change (backward-looking progress), i.e. it is not a factor of social *dynamis*, but it can, and should be, a yardstick of social practice and political intervention (Allen, 2017). Other theorists of the fourth generation seem to share this more reserved or even outrightly pessimistic stance, closer to the first generation of Critical Theory. Hartmut Rosa, for example, identifies the imperatives of social acceleration and dynamic stabilization, i.e. the imperatives of economic growth, technological acceleration and incessant cultural innovation, as the core drivers of social transformation and formulates almost apocalyptic conditions as their logical endstate, while at the same time, however, finding an antidote in the idea and possibility of replacing instrumentalizing and reifying social and material relationships with resonant ones – with *resonance* being itself an inherent promise of modern society.

Praxis: How to advance emancipatory social change

Despite all its skepticism, Critical Theory clearly is heir to the enlightenment tradition, sharing with it, firstly, belief in the power of reason and of rational knowledge about society and, secondly, belief in its rational improvability. However, it is also characterized by a particular form of self-reflexivity (Celikates, 2019): Critical theorists perceive

themselves as inevitably and insurmountably situated not just in historical contexts but also in conditions of social struggle. The fact that social reality is itself dynamic, i.e. changing and evolving over time, implies that sociological knowledge - even truth itself - is dependent on its historical context. Hence, Critical Theory is “a theory which attributes a temporal core to truth instead of contrasting truth as something invariable to the movement of history” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: xi), as the famous dictum by Horkheimer and Adorno to the 1969 edition of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* goes. At the same time, the fact that all social thought emanates from concrete social conditions, and therefore social struggles, implies that theory itself is a form of social practice. It means getting involved in those struggles, while the normative commitment to emancipation and transformation makes critical theorists side with the oppressed and/or alienated. This is why Horkheimer in his seminal contribution to ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ speaks of a ‘dynamic unity’ between theory and practice, in which theory is “not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change” (Horkheimer, 1972: 215).³

This stimulation, however, for all critical theorists alike, has to be pursued against the grain of the dominant social conditions and the prevailing powers, since these, as we have seen, tend to develop mechanisms for the invisibilization and immobilization of conflict and for the prevention of transformation. Therefore, Critical Theory necessarily strives to systematically explain how the historical totality of society can be recognized and then influenced by subjects, and how theory itself can make a contribution to the progressive change of conditions. Thus, it constitutively understands itself as *praxis* and as ‘philosophical action’ against false conditions, as Karl Korsch (2012), a pioneer of Critical Theory, has put it. Its goal is determined by the idea that a true pacification of existence must be a historical possibility or at the very least an action-guiding regulative principle.

Now obviously, the question of *praxis* is closely linked to that of *dynamis*, i.e. to the conception of dynamic motors of historical change, since Critical Theory claims not only to be able to identify desirable changes in society, but also to promote them conceptually and politically. At the same time, the answers given are closely linked to the respective conceptions of formational social *synthesis*. Critical theorists who advocate a more monistic version of *synthesis*, naturally tend to suggest a form of practice aiming at *revolution*, at a break with more or less the totality of social structures; they advocate a transformation of the prevailing form of existence altogether. Even if there are certain, more evolutionary, proposals in Adorno or Fromm – such as, for example, the demand for an unconditional basic income in Fromm’s (2013) work, or for a radical reduction of working hours in *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno, 1990) – the horizon of the first generation’s critique is clearly a socialist revolution, as envisaged by Marx. This conception is closely tied to an understanding of critique as the task of radical negation of the existing social reality, a negation formulated from within the conditions of a ‘false’ totality. Nevertheless, even this form of radical critique depends on the idea of some immanent tendencies of social reality that contradict existing social structures and that are able to be discovered by theoretical effort. As Adorno (arguably the most radical ‘negativist’ author) puts it: “‘Tendency’ is the ability of theoretical thinking to grasp its own non-identical in the concept itself”⁴ (Adorno, 2008). Critical Theory thus aims to put real

totality and inherent tendency into a dialectical confrontation from which the practice of critique becomes a possibility.

Critical theories based on a more pluralistic understanding of *synthesis*, on the other hand, are able to positively draw on existing and observable social forces, tendencies or phenomena in order to criticize objectionable or pathological elements of social structure. Thus, Habermas, for example, identifies successful processes of communicative reasoning in science or politics, whereas Honneth is quick to point to successful struggles for social recognition that expand the horizon of social inclusion or recognizable qualities. This amounts to a conception of Critical Theory as a *reconstructive social theory* that retrieves normatively valuable practices and subsequent critical standards in order to contribute to a practice of progress. For authors in this vein of thinking, social reality ‘just’ needs to be freed *from* pathological tendencies, whereas for the likes of Adorno and Marcuse, modern society tends *to be* the pathology. Hence, it appears to be much easier for the former to identify social groups, movements or forces to side with, even though the problem of how to decide which of those groups or forces are constitutive for the ‘unity’ of theory and practice has turned out to be a most ‘recalcitrant’ problem for contemporary approaches in Critical Theory (Celikates, 2019).

Conclusion

To sum up our argument, we have seen that Critical Theory comprises a rather wide variety of approaches that supply a host of very different answers to the three core questions about the defining structures and laws of transformation of society. However, these approaches tend to agree on four basic tenets which together might well define the unity or coherence of Critical Theory. These tenets, we argue, form the backbone of Critical Theory’s conception of society:

First, with respect to the question of *synthesis*, what unites all approaches of Critical Theory is the conviction that the concept of society must form the starting point of critical thinking and that society, in the sense of a social and cultural formation, is to be understood as a *historically changing totality and structural unity* that determines the respective form of existence beyond the multiplicity of social phenomena.

Second, with regard to the question of *dynamis*, all four generations of the Frankfurt School Tradition assume that there is an ‘inbuilt motor’ of social transformation inherent in the core structures of society, the basis of which is some form of endogenous conflict, tension or contradiction.

Third, when it comes to the problem of critical social *praxis*, critical theorists of all kinds share the view that – at least under modern conditions – it is in principle possible to intellectually perceive and analyze the governing laws, structures and developmental tendencies of society and to (try to) reshape or at least influence them politically.

Furthermore, and fourth, all critical theorists alike are committed to a normative perspective that takes emancipation from domination, oppression, and/or alienating social structures, to be a yardstick for their own critical social practice – a practice that is itself understood as an element of a transformative political struggle. Thus, the


pacification of existence, as Marcuse once put it, or a truly humane society, still is the guiding ideal of Critical Theory, even if this goal should turn out to remain ultimately utopian.

Within these commonalities, which form the core of Critical Theory, a number of differences emerged: Regarding the *synthesis* of social formation, there is the difference between monistic and dualistic conceptions of society. Faced with the misery of 19th Century wage labor and the political violence of the early and middle 20th Century, Critical Theory from Marx to Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse understood society as a negative totality. In contrast, under conditions of relatively stable democracy and the emergence of the welfare state, Critical Theory from Habermas onward focused on aspects of a ‘synthesized’ totality comprised of opposing forces such as system and lifeworld, spheres of recognition and misrecognition, alienation and resonance.

This difference in the perspective on *synthesis* has significant consequences for the respective conceptualization of the *dynamis* of society, too. As we have seen, critical theorists have developed three different understandings of *dynamis* identifiable as: linear-evolutionary, negative-dialectical or positive-dialectical. These, in turn, have led to two contrasting conceptions of *praxis* either as revolutionary abolition (*Aufhebung*) or as pragmatic evolution of social relations.

But whatever route is taken within this horizon of options, any Critical Theory of the 21st Century must reflect its respective understanding of *synthesis*, *dynamis* and *praxis* of society in order to maintain its status as a Critical Theory in the face of current contradictions, crises and struggles.

ORCID iD

Hartmut Rosa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8030-7405>

Endnotes

1. An elaboration and justification of this conceptual triad can be found in Rosa et al. 2019: 17-26.
2. Rosa in this regard is closer to early Critical Theory, because for him, alienation is an inevitable consequence of dynamic stabilization as the defining feature of modern society.
3. See also Celikates (2019: 207-210).
4. Translation by the authors.

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Author biographies

Hartmut Rosa is director of the Max-Weber-Center/Institute for Advanced Study at Erfurt University and holds the Chair of General Sociology and Social Theory at Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, Germany. He has been a visiting professor at the New School for Social Research in New York from 2001-2006 and at the FMSH/EHESS in Paris and he holds a honorary doctorate from the University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht. Among his most important books are *Alienation and Acceleration* (2007), *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity* (2013), *Resonance. A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (2019) and *The Uncontrollability of the World* (2020).

Peter Schulz is researcher at the unit General Sociology and Sociological Theory at Friedrich Schiller University, Jena, Germany. His current works systematizes the theory of capitalitic subjectivation in tradition of critical theories from Marx to Adorno and beyond. His current publications include *Kapitalistische Subjektivation* (2022) and the special issue, 'Growth and Democracy' in the journal, *Anthropological Theory*' (2021).