

Welcome to the final session of the inaugural year of the Humboldt University Critical Theory Summer School. We—Alice Crary and Anna Katsman—have been tasked with a very brief résumé of the week’s panels, papers and discussions. Before getting started, we wanted to take a moment to mention the enormous amount of work required for a project like this one and to acknowledge the time and energy of Rahel, Eva, Isette, Lea, Amira, Selana, Marvin and also—hugely, on the administrative side—Anja Mayer.

The unifying theme of the summer school is the cluster of philosophical and political themes that are placed under the rubric of a critical theory of society, that is, at the most basic level, a theory that aims to promote an emancipatory politics by offering a special kind of theoretical image of society. Suppose we add that contributions to critical theorizing have traditionally been understood as aspiring to guide action by revealing to us something about what our true interests are and thereby playing a liberating role. It’s not difficult to appreciate why these commitments seem to raise questions about—to list our specific topics—“progress, regression, and social change.” Even though, as we have seen, there is room for dispute about how these things are best understood and, indeed, about whether we need new terms for discussing them. We considered these topics in reference to Kant’s and Hegel’s philosophies of history, Adorno’s and Benjamin’s conceptions of what can be called the dialectics of progress, the disruptive power of Foucauldian genealogy, the dynamics of social change and—lastly, today—Habermas’ reconstructive account of historical materialism and social evolution. When we chatted yesterday afternoon about what was most arresting and helpful about treatments of these topics throughout the week, it struck both of us that there had been a great deal of agreement—agreement notable given the range of theoretical approaches represented by participants in the summer school. The impression of agreement has to some extent been countered by our lively—and helpful—discussions last night and today. Still it seems worth reviewing the ground we covered by returning to some very fundamental sources of difference and, for a moment, trying to highlight them.

Here’s a place to start in thinking about our umbrella topic “progress.” There seems to

be general agreement that what is at stake is movement toward emancipation, but how to understand these terms, and how (or whether) to link the concept “progress” to them, have been questions for dispute.

One imperfect but arguably helpful way of approaching divergences as well as convergences is to isolate several broad approaches to the idea of Critical Theory that were discernible at different times in our sessions:

1. roughly Kantian or neo-Kantian approaches with which some of Habermas’ signature contributions are sometimes classed (though as we saw today there is room for debate about the extent and nature of Habermas’ Kantianism)
2. roughly Left Hegelian approaches in the — arguably very different styles of — Jaeggi and Honneth and Pinkard
3. roughly genealogy-focused Foucauldian approaches in the styles of Saar and Allen

Notice that the inheritance of the writings of (or portions of the writings of) many of our historical figures—e.g., Marx, Hegel, Adorno, Benjamin, etc.— are up for grabs among these different approaches, and that we’ve also been discussing some critical projects that don’t fit easily in any of these categories. For instance, Hauke Brunkhorst’s approach to social and legal evolution arguably has partial alliances in each of the three categories, and Eva von Redecker’s work on revolution seems to find inspiration in both neo-Hegelian and genealogical approaches. Indeed, it seems clear that each of our speakers draws in subtle ways on more than one of these traditions, so the point of the schematizing is not to invite formulaic thinking but to bring out very elementary sources of divergence.

Here’s a barebones philosophical sketch of core features of recognizable Kantian or neo-Kantian positions. Broadly they suggest that we need progress in order to establish a perspective for critique we need to be able to justify why we consider certain developments progressive while others regressive. The basic idea is that what might be called a free-standing normative criteria grounded in the rational subject will do. Progress, thus conceived, is a methodological instrument—a construction for bringing history into view in the right way. And, if we recall correctly, there was significant agreement here on a point that Pinzani made about how the mechanisms Kant uses (competition) are not satisfying. For our left-Hegelians, progress emerges from an

account of progressive social change. For Hegel himself, progress is not just the result of a certain construction but explains actual historical processes. Self-determination is the fundamental horizon within which all progressive change happens. No more revolutions; just getting the structure of self-determination more correct.

Our Foucauldian genealogists broadly suggest that self-determination is not the full and final horizon, but instead is one moment in the historical experiment of what it means to be human. This is a good place to draw attention to the fluidity and complexity of our classification since Jay Bernstein, not obviously a Foucauldian, is the person who said this most clearly in discussing what he takes from Adorno and Benjamin. Indeed, Bernstein went on to suggest that a concept of universal humanity that would be sufficiently ethical to avoid oppression has not yet come on the scene. What is ethically required is far from clear, making the distinction between reform and revolution unstable/undecidable. The point is—and here we're back to some themes of Foucauldians—that the idea of universality which underwrites the historical accounts of Kant and Hegel is not a genuine universality and construing history in this way blocks consciousness of oppression. Rather than perpetuate oppression through this construction of history—and this is a theme we heard sounded in reference to Adorno, Benjamin and Foucault—progress would require a different notion of reason altogether. For Adorno progress requires a revolution in the structure of reason, especially acknowledging us as natural beings. Benjamin urges us into a different ethical relation to the past, especially thinking about the victims of the past and what it would mean to acknowledge their suffering. For Foucault, we have to tell different histories in order to bring the present into view differently, to open up unforeseeable emancipatory possibilities. For these thinkers, logic as given is potentially pernicious ally, because we always have to work within specific historical constellations that may require logical transformation.

Each of the three very general classes of approaches to critique we've isolated as featuring in our discussions looks problematic to other two, so we want to sketch the kinds of tensions and pressures that each confronts:

1. Consider first the class of roughly neo-Kantian approaches:

Very roughly, from the perspective of familiar neo-Hegelians and Foucauldians the normative standards with which neo-Kantians operate are overly acontextual. Sometimes this is traced to an alleged ontological poverty that doesn't allow world-guided thought to be as such normatively rich and seems to force us to look for formal criteria for practical thought. The fundamental charge that gets levelled here is that neo-Kantianism, thus construed, misses out on the messy of humanity of reason, failing to fully register its essential social situatedness. A cluster of questions arises in this connection for the neo-Kantian critical enterprise. Assuming a roughly formal approach to the practical, where does that leave us in trying to account for the way in which material effects on experience put internal pressure on social understanding. Further, is there room here for an adequate explanation of the mechanisms of social change?

2. Next let's turn to the left Hegelians:

Whereas a common motif of left Hegelian thought is that social phenomena are irreducibly normative, neo-Kantians tend to be skeptical about this kind of social ontology, denying that it can be a source of practical authority. Whereas left Hegelians see "immanent" perspectives as opening onto social reality, neo-Kantians tend to assume that such perspectival thought must as such be practice-relative. If we conceive of the immanence of social critique in this manner, how can we lay claim to an authoritative critical perspective on, for instance, late capitalism? Turning now to how left Hegelians can look to advocates of various Adornoian, Benjaminian, and Foucauldian approaches, it is sometimes suggested that here mistrust in the cunning of reason doesn't go deep enough. Their thought is that we need to construe the past as multi-layered and discontinuous so that a new order of reason can emerge. Logic is integral to our ethnocentric problem, so we need a creative form of remembrance that would reach beyond our current logical formations. If our stance toward history isn't more radical, how can we avoid reproducing structures of domination and veering toward imperialist or colonialist thinking? Moreover, if reason is really historical and social, why are we looking for criteria or fixed pivots for progress anyway.

3. Last, how might other thinkers put pressure on members of the loose family of Foucauldian genealogists:

The first point here is straightforward. Just as members of the rough group of thinkers we are calling neo-Kantians regard left-Hegelians as sliding into relativism in virtue of their embrace of the immanent and perspectival, they regard genealogists as incurring the same form of criticism. The kinds of genealogical projects at issue here look different to left Hegelians. At least some who identify with this label will take themselves to be, in virtue of their social ontologies, flexible enough about the social and historical character of reason to sanction the kind of disruptive re-readings of history that are here being called for—and will accordingly regard any insistence that something more radical is called for as a confused attempt to project ourselves outside reason altogether. Further, some neo-Hegelians will want to insist that it is an illusion to think that we can somehow treat different strands of history as completely separable threads, even for the purposes of needed disruption. To the extent that genealogists succumb to this illusion—some neo-Hegelians will want to protest—aren't they unable to adequately account for the mechanisms of social transformation?