

## The Politics of the Social:

### Critical Reflections on Ideologies on the Individual and the Collective

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My goal in this paper is twofold: first, I examine the ways in which Frankfurt school thinkers debunk the “scientific” relationship between organic/natural life and the social: through critiquing the scientific/positivist mode of producing the knowledge of the social; second, I hope to present another conceptualization of totality, or sociality as totality outlined, envisaged by the Frankfurt School thinkers. Differing from Durkheimian social fact that stipulates the realistic and organic integrity of the social, the Frankfurt school asserts a social totality derived from the Hegelian Marxist notion of history: an all-encompassing process in which a historical subject realizes himself. Ultimately, such totality assumes a “political”/ethical position grounded upon metaphysical humanism which strives for a rational and free society.

Basically, the Frankfurt school thinkers share with Lukács’ attitude towards natural sciences, more specifically, a critique of science. For Lukács, to regard society as governed by scientific laws is to adopt a contemplative position as opposed to aiming at disrupting the status quo and thereby creating new social laws. “Insofar as an attempt to found present society as eternity took over from an interest in better society, which still dominated Enlightenment, a restrictive and disorienting moment entered science. A method oriented towards being and not towards becoming corresponded to the tendency to see the given society as a mechanism of equal

and self-repeating process” (70). This pre-Dialectics of Enlightenment diagnosis of social knowledge production reveals that Horkheimer has, around early 1930s at least, retained the faith in scientific methodology, reason or rationality inherited from Enlightenment (to the extent that it is practiced with a “higher” purpose, namely, the betterment of human life.) At the same time, he rightly observes that the totality of the social or more accurately, the knowledge of the social in its totality can only be grasped, achieved nominally by rendering individuals indistinguishable and their actions undifferentiated, static and thus non-productive.

However, such initial critique directing towards the lack of “real” political engagement/Practice gradually evolves into the universal denouncement of scientific objectification of any natural/social phenomenon. “The happy marriage he [Bacon] imagined between the human intellect and the nature of things is a patriarchal one: The intellect which defeats superstition must command a disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, in the enslavement of creation...” (70). Here, the cognitive overcoming of nature—or making nature its categorizable object of understanding—through Reason or Rationality cannot reflect upon the logic of its own behavior. Nor can it delimit its very mode of production. It should be noted that at this point it is unclear whether Horkheimer is critiquing the dominating mode of representation and understanding, or the very domination of the external world and human relations. Yet, it is precisely this disjunction, which requires further explication from our perspective, reveals the fundamental assumption and purported vocation of Critical Theory conceived by the Frankfurt School. In the following paragraphs, I will first examine the latter, and hopefully thereby unpack the former.

Departing from traditional theory (which arguably operates in accordance with the mechanism of social reproduction as opposed of subverting it), Critical Theory is designed to bring the basic contradictions of capitalist society into consciousness. Guided by the inherent interest in superseding class domination, critical theory—the revealing of social contradictions— not only produces social knowledge, but also serves as an imminent critique of the existing society itself (and thus constitutes a struggle). As Horkheimer puts it, a critical theorist’s vocation is “the struggle to which his thought belongs, not thought as something independent,

to be divided from this struggle” (KT 2, 168/66). In other words, under the framework of CT, the understanding of the social—the act, the epistemic paradigm and the accumulated knowledge— IS the struggle. This theorization launches a forceful attack against the positivist, “scientific” methodology: While the latter fails to reflect upon the logic of its own practices, the former obtains a continuously reflexive mechanism that assumes the historical and political function of knowledge production. In this way, CT embodies the self-knowledge of the objective created by men as well as the engrained path through which men and social reality reach self-knowledge.

Therefore, knowledge of society becomes at the same time a judgment and evaluation of it. As we know, a judgment/evaluation always requires a point of reference or standard, be it ethical, political or religious, against which an act can be judged/evaluated. Here, the ultimate point of reference, which also constitutes the environment for each individual’s unfolding, is a Hegelian-Marxist (or historicist-materialist) conception of History. As explicated by Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man*,

When historical content enters into the dialectical concepts and determines methodologically its development and function, dialectical thought attains the concreteness which links the structure of thought to that of reality. Logical truth becomes historical truth. The ontological tension between essence and appearance, between “is” and “ought” becomes historical tension, and the inner negativity of the object-world is understood as the work of historical subject –man in his struggle with nature and society (11).

The transposition from logical truth to historical truth inserts a dialectical intervention which treats the external world as the working-out of the intuiting subject, not yet in itself. Moreover, this implies that the historical subject has not yet realized itself in the present society (which is characterized by the negation of the free and the rational—the reification of human relations and the alienation of men). In spite of this, through the will and the (material) struggle for a free and rational society, inherent in man and human existence, man can discover the fact that human’s historical vocation is negated in the prevailing conditions. Thus, what is

constantly assessed and compared then becomes the distance between the existing objectifications or externalization of human activities and man's inherent potentiality measured at a particular historical moment.

It is worth noting that in the Hegelian formulation the dynamics between logic and history is a less straightforward one: It can never be reduced to a simple supersession of the logical by an ethical, political functioning derived from humanistic historicism (as it is the case for Frankfurt School). Moreover, the "truth" conceived within the parameters of CT, is the objectivity, or positivity embedded in "the predicates of honesty and consistence, of rationality and of search for peace and freedom" (Horkheimer, *KT2*, 179). Here, one can easily observe that formal logic—and its derivative cluster of reason, rationality, and scientific methodology—is merely one among other speculative instruments through which humanistic goals can be achieved and human beings realized. Thus, CT is able to present itself as an integral part of the all-embracing process of history, in which a subject realizes himself through striving for a free and rationally organized society.

For humanistic historicism, social totality does not refer to or claim to be a scientific concept in the same way it does for "social fact". Rather, totality here means humanity's generally determined and projected history at a given moment. To grasp such totality (via proper epistemic AND political means, namely Critical Theory) then becomes the way to comprehend existing reality from the stand point of man's "natural goal"—a rational society. In other words, CT sees itself as humanities' self-knowledge that reflects (upon) the continuous historical unfolding of a subject in its struggle towards a free, rational whole.

Presumably, under these assumptions and premises, the critical knowledge proper cannot have the structure of formal logic or scientific systems for such systematization would mean that men again imprison themselves in the abstract law of logic. The consequences of scientism as well as second-order scientism—using scientific rationale to critique scientism—are well captured by Goran Therborn in his assessment of the Frankfurt School:

Just as Weber saw science as a process of rationalization, so Lukács regards it as an aspect of reification, which applied to the human sphere.

Immutable scientific laws of society were the expression of a world in which human relationship has become things beyond human control, and the separation of different scientific disciplines reveals a specialization which destroyed the totality and the historicity of human existence (69).

As I have tried to show early, the reintroduction of a Hegelian notion of history back into Marxist discourse, summarized as “humanistic historicism,” is the answer Frankfurt school come up with; to regain man’s control over his destination, and to reclaim the social in its totality. However, two crucial problems arise regarding such critique of scientific knowledge production and its lethal effect on social totality: First, CT—its assumption, methodology and objectives—rests itself upon a particular kind of metaphysical humanism, which leaves no room for scientific or positivistic analyses, not to say renders them un-ethical or a-political. The materialist emphasis of Marx’s social critique derived from his theory of political economy is mostly disregarded and refuted. So is any alternative political action envisioned from the stand point of science or variants of scientific methodology. Here, we are left with an empty, yet impassioned call for an Ethics of life, which is supposed to correct, if not replace the prevailing epistemological AND political paradigm.

Secondly and more importantly, while Adorno rightly argues that “formal Logic is the expression of indifference to individuals” (DoE, 238), the historicist-humanistic conception of a subject and its relation to the social also precludes the possibility for individual differences, complexities and non-instrumental contradictions. For society is always reduced to the realization of individuals’ will and struggle to fulfill their unitary historical mission. The ontological and social specificities are overridden by the totality Frankfurt School thinkers desperately try to salvage en face the modern conditions, reification in particular. However, the lack of methodical examination, which provides a way to access complex social dynamics, results in the disappearance of “real” struggle—the vital, diversified, and differentiated (inter)actions to overcome or achieve one’s historical standing.

Now, I have delineated Frankfurt School’s formulation of social totality from the perspective of historicist humanism. Yet, this only constitutes one side of story. Building on my previous analysis that CT might reduce

science and history to an ethically determined philosophy of history, I will now look at how Frankfurt School's insistence on a Marxist, materialist interpretation of the social might counter such critique. And I will pay special attention to their treatment of science or systematic methodology in their general theorization.

The transposition or extension from the epistemic critique to one against the socio-economic domination (allegedly demonstrating the materialist perspective) is conducted via another operation of equivalence: the reduction of science and a possible philosophy of science to the capitalist mode of production. "In Marxist theory of society, science is numbered among the human forces of production... Scientific knowledge shares the fate of productive forces and means of production of other kinds..." (70). For the Frankfurt School, every fundamental activity including the work of epistemic and social critique is a matter of social labor. For instance, the formalization of Reason is understood by Adorno as "only the intellectual expression of mechanized mode of production" (DoE, 126).

Before unpacking Frankfurt School's theoretical formulation of Marxist materialism, I will do a parallel reintroduction/summary of its object of critique. Modern sociology, established by the French positivists such as Durkheim, operates with its unyielding scientific methodology, which might appear strange to many as its subject matter seems too self-evident and all-too-familiar in the everyday context. Their mythological assumption is that modern society has become "complicated:" too complicated to be described, delimited or generalized by the previously existing epistemological grid. Its impenetrability results from the unprecedented post-Industrial Revolution population growth, "the death of God," the specialization of human functions, the highly compartmentalized and alienated labor, the fragmentation of everyday experiences and later on, globalization. Thus, in order to obtain a picture of society as totality, positivist sociologists take recourse to science—the logical, rational and systematic thinking of the world—to understand social life.

Drawing on conceptual (and material, to some degree) analogies from natural sciences, Durkheim claims that Life—human life and thus presumably social life—cannot be understood as subdivisible, but rather as a unity of living substance in its totality. Just as the properties of water do

not exist equally in oxygen or hydrogen, life cannot be analyzed in terms of its “parts,” “particles.” Through a mechanism of scientific organicism, the collective unity of the social, its constitution and phenomena, is believed to reside exclusively in the society itself, not to be derived from its individual members. However, such conceptualization raises two questions: 1) how can we account for the origin of this organic, holistic collectivity; 2) what are the specific dynamics—the concrete activities or interactions—between the individual and the social? (even if we accept the theory that such relationship resembles that among atoms, elements and compounds). These two inquires combined lead to a more practical and urgent political concern: to what extent and through what means we, as organically social beings, are structured by and can engage in the re-structuring of our society?

It seems to me that the ways to locate the grounds of such total sociality require 1) delimiting the scope and positive content of the difference—or equivalence—between the organic, biological notion of Life and the social; and 2) unpacking the precise dynamics between the individual and the collective with respect to their acting autonomy or sovereignty (depending on whether we are examining the practices of an individual subject or a political entity). A positive, authentic or genuine difference that marks an individual apart from another individual AND from a social collective cannot merely be “shown” or “proven,” as it were, by some kind of epistemic poetics, bio/eco-aesthetics. Rather, I suspect both “actual differentiation” in content and demarcation of formal boundaries would need to demonstrate that whatever designated as within a domain is willfully able to control its/his/her own identity and own life, somehow. Otherwise, the modes of “differentiation” or “collectivization” discussed are simply variations of certain ideological construct, real but lacking objective and productive character.

I hope to generate a dialectically informed criticism towards positivist methodology and scientism at large; and more importantly, search for possible ways to reintroduce the structure of politics into the predominantly epistemological (or sadly biological) investigation of social totality. To establish the “reality” of the social (or “social facts”), Durkheim extracts and externalizes the distinctive “social” character from individual con-

sciousness, or psychology conceived by him. “Social facts do not differ from psychological facts in quality only; they have a different substratum” (70). The state of *conscience collective*, or the mentality of the group, has a fundamentally different nature than that of the individuals. Collective representations/concepts, which express the way in which a group thinks of itself in its relations to the external world which affect it, have different subjects and objects than those of psychology. What this implies is that collective ways of acting and thinking have a reality outside of individuals whose actions, beliefs and judgments must take into account of, if not conform to it. In other words, the social—the consciousness, mentality, representation, and rules of its constitution—exists as an a priori, arguably organic collectivity that imposes itself from outside upon the individuals. Durkheim admits that for the social to exist, individuals must play an indispensable role in carrying out “social” activities. Yet, the synthetic process during which multiple consciousness and actions are combined and enter into the “social” (which they are supposedly already conditioned by) takes place *outside* each individual actor. Therefore, he concludes that it is necessary that the social operates “to fix, to institute outside us, certain ways of acting and certain judgments which do not depend on each particular will taken separately” (71).

Durkheim recognizes that for a social fact to exist (or even sustain itself), several individuals, at least, must have contributed their actions; and it is this combined action which has created something new. However, his general theoretical framework prevents him from unpacking or glimpsing at the nature and (inter)actions of the individual. In order to tackle the initial critical inquiries, centering on political agency and its relation to scientism, I take recourse to the Frankfurt School critique of social totality. My “intervention” here is by no means a general or comprehensive introduction of Frankfurt School as a philosophical and academic enterprise (for Critical Theory has its own complex genealogy from German idealism, Lukács’ Hegelian Marxism, Weber’s social theory, let alone its institutional intertwinement.)

However, Adorno and Horkheimer (in the fourth volume of the “Frankfurt contributions to Sociology”), argue that such sociological positivism/empiricism justify its existence by relegating the complex and



fragmented experience of modern life to the realm of pure appearance. It tends to conceal, if not erase the fundamental relation between appearance and essence of sociality; that is to say, it postulates repeatability, controllability and the human ability to isolate specific factors while bracketing the totality of the essential social interconnected-ness. As “diagnosed” by the Frankfurt School, it is not the society or individuals have become more complicated and unsurveyable, but “the separation of functions in a society based on the division of labor has taken hold of the knowing subjects, and confined these to such an extent to specific, mainly technical, practical tasks, that an insight into the whole is hardly available to them any longer...” (148).

At the core of CT, all the observing, interpreting and philosophizing conducted by sociologists and critical theorists have the same structure as that of the socioeconomic mode of production. Thus, while CT constitutes an imminent, materialist critique of the social, its criticality nonetheless cannot escape its own judgment and evaluation of the modern society—one characterized by reification and rationalization. Following this line of analysis, contrary to what the positivists have in mind, the scientific preoccupation cannot possibly constitute the effective means to grasp or reclaim the social. Rather, it is symptomatic of the rejection of the possibility to gain an insight of the social whole; for it fails to recognize that its own work is embedded in the capitalist mode of production. (This is the most forceful, materialist-based criticism the Frankfurt School carries out against the positivists although it seems to me that its materialist specificities can only perform at the conceptual level. In other words, its operating environment pertains mostly to the ideological realm.)

At this point, we have encountered several versions of the conceptualization of social totalities. We have a) Durkheim’s positivist, organic social fact; b) Frankfurt School’s social totality guided by historicist humanism; c) Frankfurt School’s rendition of the totality “imprisoned” by scientism; d) Frankfurt School’s rendition of a completely reified sociality. These formulations intersect and cut across levels of the social, the knowledge of the social and various critical planes of the two. From our point of view, their divergence does not merely suggest an epistemic gap between the theory of society and empirical social research: It cannot be explained

simply in terms of the lack of an adequate conceptual system or of the volume of available data. Moreover, the extra-epistemic substance—the continuous critical struggle to reassemble the theoretical frameworks of the social and to adjust its scope—occupies the core of these theorizations on totality and the contemporary engagement with them. They reveal the unfinished AND unfinishable process of reification of human relations/rationalization; more importantly, the possible sustainment and mutation of social totality as an experiential and analytical category. I argue that it is precisely this “incompleteness” within totality—the extra-epistemic constitution of its structural core—opens up the space for and require individuals’ political intervention.

Finally, we arrive at (approximately) my speculation at the beginning of this paper: the laws governing the entire dynamics of the whole derive from the interaction and tension between the individual and society. To conclude this paper, I propose to inquire into the nature, activities and potential of the individual—especially its purportedly inherent qualities such as autonomy and agency—with respect to the constitution and transformation of the social. For Durkheim (and his teacher Comte), individual himself is something socially produced, that is to say, his nature and actions are structured, constricted by a priori, organic social totality. Contrary to this, today’s commonly accepted view is that individual is something naturally given; for all the scientism we have inherited tends to convince us that every human being enters this world as an independent, biological being. However, both the so-called classical sociologists like Durkheim and the Frankfurt School thinkers reject such simple formulation of the individual-- as the biological individuation is insufficient to capture and explain the formation, identification and identity of an individual.

For the Frankfurt School, all individuality owes its content and configuration to society. Here, it should be noted while Frankfurt school might have been critiquing knowledge of totality, but there still is more assumption that it can be done—i.e., that there is a totality, and to some extent there are proper methods that allow (them) to critique other methods, positivism in particular. The dialectic, after all, is for much of Frankfurt a relation to a totality; just because even Horkheimer might say that average people seem to have lost a sense of the whole, or access to that

knowledge, it doesn't necessarily mean that he himself didn't still believe in its presence, and to some extent imply that he had that view that others had lost.

The (relatively contemporary) faith in the autonomy and the radical independence of the individual from social totality results from the division of labor in the capitalist society. Yet, to assert the irreducible dialectical formation between the individual and the social, they (strangely and surprisingly) posit the material basis for such structure in the free market. As Adorno and Horkheimer explicates, (in 1956)

The form of the individual itself is one proper to a society which maintains its life by means of free market, where free and independent economic subjects come together. The more individual is strengthened, the more power of the society increases, due to the relationship of exchange which forms the individual. The two, individual and society, are complementary concepts (45, AS).

Nevertheless, they immediately qualify the above claim, which seemingly upholds liberalism, with an explanation of what they mean by the term "free." Taking up on Hegel's insight in *Philosophy of History*, they distinguish men who are truly free from those who deem themselves free. The difference lies in fundamental break between a) the personality as the fundamental determination of equality, which enters into existence by virtue of property and b) individuality as the bearer of the living spirit. In the former, man imagines that he, as a free and autonomous being, only pursues his own advantage by competing with his equals. However, unbeknownst to him and his allegedly free "equals," they tend to serve as instruments of a higher power and collaborate, often unconsciously, in the artful and omnipresent structure of the established order, be it state and civil society.

On the other hand, a truly free individual is one who realizes himself in the process of creating objective and universal conditions for a free, rational society. In other words, the individual is precisely the opposite of a being of nature: it is a being that emancipates itself from mere conditions of nature. From its initial constitution, it is fundamentally social and thereby a being lonely within itself. (This is precisely why he must realize

and “found” himself in the social while simultaneously transforming the social). Only through a dialectical interrogation between the individual and the universal, he can escape from the epistemic and social illusion of a)—for he would no longer be alienated from the objective world in his own coming into self-consciousness. The Frankfurt school draws heavily upon this Hegelian model of individual’s identity formation in their own theorization.

Again, one can observe that here the yardstick to measure the authenticity and radicality of an individual’s freedom, autonomy circles back to an ethic of Life: to what extent an individual is willing and struggling to exploit his very constitution onto AND against the collective, to which its own lawfulness is owed. Nonetheless, I want to emphasize that such process differs from the liberalist thesis on self-fulfillment or the actualization of one’s “inner potential” in that the former always involves the issue of survival. According to the Frankfurt School, “*only he who differentiates himself from the interests and aspirations of others, he who becomes substance for himself, who establishes his self-preservation and development as a norm, is an individual...*” (45, AS).

While Durkheim recognizes the normative, imperative structure of social fact, he externalizes it from the nature and activities of the individual. The totalizing scientism, along with instrumental rationalization of social life, tends to generate an epistemic illusion: the more efficient, planned, scientific and immediate domination becomes, the more general, impersonal and anonymous it seems. By transposing the notion of the organic regulatory totality to the establishment of (competing) norms in the name of survival, the Frankfurt School shifts the critical plane of struggle from the epistemic to the political. It is only through such operation, the experiential and analytical category of the distinguishable, differentiated individual can be reintroduced into the structural constitution of social totality.

Building on Frankfurt School’s insight into the concentric and dialectical dynamics between the individual and the collective, I argue that the standard by which to measure the social integrity of a collectivity or the essential singularity of an individual, be it organic or artificially constructed, is their capacity for willfully disrupting the very constitution/the internal logic of the social (and itself). Such process may or may not pre-

suppose the notion of autonomy in the strict sense of the term; yet it does require a materialized, intelligible, presumably violent act of reordering, reassembling. In other words, any coherently distinguishable, demarcated and stable “unit,” regardless of its scale, magnitude and anatomy, can only exist as such by demonstrating the ability to (re)constitute itself *against* the existing social order and then dialectically transform such collectivity and itself. “To exist is to differ” (73). To exist socially is to differ from other socially conditioned individuals, thereby interrupt the social unity which one is a part of and conditioned by, and again thereby resemble a collectivity of second order, which implies the initial individual transformed.

I would like to end the paper with the following passage, which poignantly (and accurately) delineates material and experiential patterns of individuality in our mundane social life. It potentially destroys my argument: it reveals the purely conceptual, uncritical and even apolitical nature of my proposal. From the Adorno and Horkheimer,

Today the individual ego has been absorbed by the pseudo-ego of totalitarian planning. Even those who hatch the totalitarian plan, despite and because of the huge mess and capital over which they dispose, have a little autonomy as those they control. The latter are organized in all sorts of groups, and in these the individual is but an element possessing no importance in himself. If he wants to preserve himself, he must work as part of a team, read and skilled in everything, whether in industry, agriculture and sports. In every camp he must defend his physical existence, his working, eating and sleeping place, must take cuffs and blows and submit to the toughest discipline. The responsibility of long term planning for himself and his family has given way to the ability to adjust himself to mechanical tasks of the moment. The individual constricts himself ... (AS)

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