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DOSSIÊ: ATUALIDADE POLÍTICA DA TEORIA CRÍTICA

Exploring a Critical Theory of politics

Prospectando uma Teoria Crítica da política

Prospección de una Teoría Crítica de la política

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Abstract: The question of the *contemporary political relevance* of Critical Theory points to a deeper problem: the fundamental relationship between Critical Theory and politics. Their relationship status has to be regarded as complicated. Politics, so a widespread judgement goes, has no place in the cosmos of Critical Theory: where the place for a theoretically reflected analysis of politics could or should be, so the repeatedly heard reproach (for example, Howard 2000), there is a gap in the center of the historical "Frankfurt School" (Wiggershaus 1995, Jay 1973) around Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. In the following, we do not merely want to attest another "politics deficit" to "classical" Critical Theory, but rather, on the one hand, to measure the exact relationship to the object of politics, and on the other hand, to take a look at the current state of theory, which proves to be quite diverse. To ask whether and how a Critical Theory of politics is possible today does not, however, mean merely reflecting on current developments. This important task, we are convinced, first needs a theoretical foundation in order to be able to exploit the full potential of the approach. Accordingly, it is necessary to explore how, under current circumstances, the classical programmatic of Critical Theory can be linked to politics. In order to shed light on the problems with which contemporary thinking about the possibility and form of a Critical Theory of politics is confronted, we will begin by addressing the question of the place of politics in Critical Theory and the politics of critical theorists in some detail, and outline five theoretical levels (theoricity, aspiration, programmatic, theoretical methodology, temporal core) and three major paths (deepening, reorientation and return) on the basis of current approaches subsequently.

Keywords: Critical Theory. Frankfurt School. Political theory. Sociological theory

Resumo: A questão da *relevância política atual* da Teoria Crítica aponta para um problema mais profundo: o da relação fundamental entre a Teoria Crítica e a política. O *status* de seu relacionamento deve ser considerado complicado. A política, diz um julgamento amplamente difundido, não tem lugar no cosmos da Teoria Crítica: ali onde poderia ou deveria estar o lugar para uma análise teoricamente refletida da política, segundo a reprovação repetidamente ouvida (por exemplo, Howard 2000), ali há uma lacuna no centro da histórica "Escola de Frankfurt" (Wiggershaus 1995; Jay 1973) em torno de Max Horkheimer e Theodor W. Adorno. A seguir, não queremos apenas atestar outro "déficit de política" na Teoria Crítica "clássica", mas sim, por um lado, medir a relação exata com o objeto da política e, por outro lado, lançar um olhar sobre o estado atual da teoria, que se mostra bastante diverso. Perguntar se e como uma Teoria Crítica da política é possível hoje porém não significa meramente refletir sobre os desenvolvimentos atuais. Estamos convencidos de que esta importante tarefa precisa primeiro de uma base teórica para poder explorar todo o potencial da abordagem. Nesse sentido, é necessário explorar como, nas atuais circunstâncias, a programática clássica da Teoria Crítica pode ser vinculada à política. Para lançar luz sobre os problemas com os quais o pensamento contemporâneo sobre a possibilidade e a forma de uma Teoria Crítica da política é confrontado, começaremos abordando com algum detalhe a questão do lugar da política na Teoria Crítica e a política dos teóricos críticos, para na sequência delinear cinco níveis teóricos



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(teoricidade, aspiração, programática, metodologia teórica, núcleo temporal) e três caminhos principais (aprofundamento, reorientação e retorno) com base em abordagens atuais.

Palavras-chave: Teoria Crítica. Escola de Frankfurt. Teoria política. Teoria sociológica. Política.

Resumen: La cuestión de la *relevancia política actual* de la Teoría Crítica apunta a un problema más profundo: el de la relación fundamental entre la Teoría Crítica y la política. El status de su relación debe considerarse complicado. La política, dice un juicio ampliamente sostenido, no tiene lugar en el cosmos de la Teoría Crítica: allí donde podría o debería ser el lugar para un análisis teóricamente reflejado de la política, según el reproche escuchado repetidamente (por ejemplo, Howard 2000), hay un brecha en el corazón de la histórica "Escuela de Frankfurt" (Wiggershaus 1995; Jay 1973) alrededor de Max Horkheimer y Theodor W. Adorno. A continuación, no queremos simplemente apuntar otro "déficit de política" en la Teoría Crítica "clásica", sino, por un lado, medir la relación exacta con el objeto de la política y, por otro lado, echar un vistazo en el estado actual de la teoría, que resulta ser bastante diferente. Sin embargo, preguntar si y cómo es posible una Teoría Crítica de la política hoy no significa simplemente reflexionar sobre los desarrollos actuales. Estamos convencidos de que esta importante tarea necesita primero una base teórica para poder explotar todo el potencial del enfoque. En este sentido, es necesario explorar cómo, en las circunstancias actuales, la programática clásica de la Teoría Crítica puede vincularse a la política. Para arrojar luz sobre los problemas con los que se enfrenta el pensamiento contemporáneo sobre la posibilidad y la forma de una Teoría Crítica de la política, comenzaremos por abordar con cierto detalle la cuestión del lugar de la política en la Teoría Crítica y la política de los teóricos críticos, para luego delinear cinco niveles teóricos (teorecidad, aspiración, programática, metodología teórica, núcleo temporal) y tres caminos principales (profundización, reorientación y retorno) basados en enfoques actuales.

Palabras clave: Teoría Crítica. Escuela de Frankfurt. Teoría política. Teoría sociológica. Política

The place of politics in Critical Theory³

The world is mad and it will remain so.
— Max Horkheimer in Adorno and Horkheimer 2019, 26

If you want to see a demonstration of what is meant by dialectic, by social dialectic, in a very simple model, then such a definition of the nature of the political is probably the best paradigm one could find
— Adorno 2019, 39

As is well known, the label *Critical Theory* was first and significantly coined by Max Horkheimer

in his essay *Traditional and critical theory* published in 1937 (Horkheimer 1972). This essay is to be understood as a continuation of his 1931 inaugural lecture as director of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main, in which he developed an interdisciplinary and empirically-socially informed program of a social philosophy inspired by Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. Horkheimer defined the subject matter of this philosophy quite broadly:

Its ultimate aim is the philosophical interpretation of the vicissitudes of human fate – the fate of humans not as mere individuals, however, but as members of a community. It is thus above all concerned with phenomena that can only be understood in the context of human social life: with the state, law, economy, religion – in short, with the entire material and intellectual culture of humanity. (Horkheimer 1993, 425).

This broad definition is logical insofar as the work of the Institute for Social Research, as also formulated by Horkheimer in the preface to the first issue of the in-house *Journal of Social Research* (*Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*), aims at a theory of contemporary society as a whole. Instead of falling prey to the prevailing division of labor into individual disciplines, according to Horkheimer, it is important to elaborate a discipline-integrative approach, since only such an approach is capable of grasping, understanding, and criticizing society in its totality. While state and law, as well as the associated disciplines, were still addressed in the inaugural lecture of 1931 as subject areas and components of a project of "Critical Theory", state, law and political science are no longer explicitly mentioned in the aforementioned preface to the *Journal of Social Research* of 1932 – unlike philosophy, sociology, (social) psychology, economics and history.⁴ In this (implicit) *exclusion* of approaches from political science and governmental science, an orientation of the Critical Theory project already seems to have been established, which, as mentioned at the beginning, has also

³ This article develops further the thoughts we originally laid out in the introduction to our volume *Kritische Theorie der Politik* published in German (Bohmann and Sörensen 2019). However, while there we focus primarily on the collected contributions, here we generalize our basic perspective and refer to a wider array of English-language publications.

⁴ To our knowledge, the famous first preface of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* is still not translated into English.

been diagnosed many times and is noticeable in the lack of an independent subject of “politics” in overview works (Gordon, Hammer and Honneth 2020). Such assessments were flanked by accusations of political abstinence against the representatives of the so-called first generation of Critical Theory, which found their most prominent expression in Georg Lukács’ *aperçu* of the “Grand Hotel Abyss”, to which the left-wing intelligentsia had retreated and from which the decline of the world could be analysed, but not fought politically or even averted (Jeffries 2016).

The place of politics in Critical Theory thus seems to be a blank space in several respects. This diagnosis, however, is based on reductions that do not do justice to the specific layout of Critical Theory. Insofar as the specific form of Critical Theory as a dialectical theoretical project also suggests a dialectical understanding of politics, which necessarily also entails contradictory conclusions, attitudes and consequences in dealing with and thinking about the political, we believe it would be more accurate to speak of *constellations of ambivalence*. These sometimes manifest themselves in the form of divergent positions within the discussion context of the “Frankfurt School”, but sometimes also within the work of a single protagonist alone. In the following, we will attempt to demonstrate this briefly with a view to the level of *practical politics* or *politics of theory* on the one hand, and the level of a *theory of politics* on the other.

The politics of Critical Theory and Critical Theorists

People want us far more outspoken. [...] Our style must reveal what we think should happen.
— Max Horkheimer in Adorno and Horkheimer 2019, 42)

The establishment of the Institute for Social Research in 1923 was already a highly political affair. Founder and major patron Felix Weil, an Argentine-born Marxist and son of a wealthy grain merchant, was acutely politically motivated and sought contact with practical politics. His vision

was a scientific, decidedly Marxist institute that would help guide the political struggles of the day. At the same time, the endowed institute itself was virtually foisted on the then actually conservative Frankfurt University through skillful political action, as it were as a “Trojan horse”. Thus the programmatic speech at the opening of the institute in 1924 by the first director Carl Grünberg, in which he unequivocally declared his Marxist orientation, which had hitherto been veiled in official matters, caused great irritation on the part of the university authorities. However, this origin did not have a lasting effect on the politics of the Critical Theorists. Not least for historical reasons, their development took a different direction. Thus, numerous theoretical reservations are increasingly formulated concerning the fundamental possibility of action aimed at overcoming domination in a totally “administered world” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xi). At the latest with the appearance of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, such a pessimism seems to unfold that all politics seems impossible or hopelessly corrupted. Adorno formulates this later in an aphorism of the *Minima Moralia* in the following way: “Society is integral, before it ever becomes ruled as totalitarian. Its organization encompasses even those who feud against it, and normalizes their consciousness.” (Adorno 2005, 206). In view of this, the radical detachment from political events seems consistent. The resigned view of the possibilities of emancipatory politics under the conditions of liberal-capitalist representative democracies can also be found in Herbert Marcuse, the institute member often perceived as the most political proponent of the first generation, when he states in 1969: “The democratic process organized by this structure is discredited to such an extent that no part of it can be extracted which is not contaminated.” (Marcuse 1969, 63). The “Great Refusal” he had already propagated the year before (Marcuse 1964, see also Lamas et al. 2017) indeed seems the only logical reaction in this context. Nonetheless, as various studies have convincingly elaborated, especially with regard to Adorno, the accusation of a distanced-resigned retreat

into the ivory tower is untenable if only because it ignores the practical-political engagement of central protagonists (Laudani 2013; Marotti 2016; Heins 2012). This brings to light an *ambivalence* that was very clear to Adorno himself: "Whoever puts forward proposals easily makes himself into an accomplice. [...] A purist attitude, however, that refrains from intervening likewise reinforces that from which it timorously recoils." (Adorno 1998a, 3).

Similarly, an ambivalence can also be observed with regard to the political status of theory or theoretical work itself. If one follows Leo Löwenthal's determination, then Marcuse's "Great Refusal" is also constitutive for the theoretical project of Critical Theory itself: "Well, it is exactly the negative that was the positive: this consciousness of not going along, the refusal. The essence of Critical Theory is really the inexorable analysis of what is." (Löwenthal in Dubiel 1981, 146). Unlike with regard to politics and political action in the everyday language sense, however, refusal in the context of theorizing does not stand for cutting one's ties to the world. To see oneself as "collaborators of the negative phase of the dialectical process" (ibid.) does not mean to understand one's own theory production as apolitical or to commit oneself to aversion from the world. Rather, Critical Theory is based on an understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, according to which not only "practice is a source of power for theory," but also "theory becomes a transformative and practical productive force." (Adorno 1998b, 278 and 264). In this respect, the theoretical work of the circle around Horkheimer and Adorno was always understood by the participants themselves – even in the most pessimistic moments – also as a political intervention with an *emancipatory concern*. The goal was the continuation of Marx's categorical imperative, "to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence" (Marx and Engels 1975, 182). Critical Theory is thus always *political* theory insofar as it is partisan, borne by a "concern for the abolition of social injustice" (Horkheimer 1972, 242), and thus claims to be "the kind of theory which is

an element in action leading to new social forms" (ibid., 216). However, it only becomes *politically effective* if an appropriate *addressee* can be found who allows the theory to prove itself in reality, to demonstrate its historical validity. The ambivalence thus does not exist with regard to the (claimed) politicized of Critical Theory, but with regard to the (possible) search for and dealing with potential addressees of the theory. On the one hand, the rather resigned variant of the "message in a bottle" is conceivable, which corresponds to the theoretical assumptions of a totally administered world and passively awaits possible future addressees. On the other hand, the rather activist-offensive variant can be considered, which Horkheimer formulates somewhat shirt-sleevedly but quite pointedly in a conversation with Adorno: "It is our cursed duty to marry thinking with right practice." (Adorno and Horkheimer 2019, 49). Adorno's willingness to change his own style during his American exile in order to reach a broader democratic public could be interpreted as a step in this direction (Mariotti 2016).

Critical Theory of politics

Politics is both ideology and genuine reality.
 – Theodor W. Adorno in Adorno and Horkheimer 2019,
 26

But what about a *systematic* reflection on politics, what about a Critical Theory of *politics* itself? If one embarks on a search, the above-mentioned diagnoses of deficits seem to be quickly confirmed: The core of Critical Theory remains peculiarly devoid of reflections on politics. It is true that political questions and issues have been addressed time and again – one thinks, for example, of the *Studies on Prejudice* (Adorno et al. 1950), which were concerned not least with the question of the extent to which and why democratic societies turn into dictatorial ones – but a systematic reflection on politics can ultimately only be found in the *periphery* of the tradition, namely in the work of Franz L.

Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer.⁵ Their studies can certainly be considered the most relevant explicitly political-theoretical approaches in the context of early Critical Theory, and both are still negotiated today as explicit guarantors of a Critical Theory of politics (Scheuerman 1997, Buchstein 2020). Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that, significantly, Neumann resigned from the Institute for Social Research as early as 1942 in the aftermath of a controversy over the adequate classification and evaluation of the relationship between capitalism and fascism, and Kirchheimer also increasingly distanced himself both intellectually and personally (see Jay 1973; Wiggershaus 1995). Political theory, it seems, was unable to find a proper place in the "interdisciplinary materialism" of the Horkheimer circle (although there were early attempts to anchor Critical Theory in political theory, see Buchstein 2010).

Seen in this light, then, the diagnoses of deficits are plausible, insofar as there is indeed a *blank space* in the work of the historical Frankfurt School in political science. How can this be explained? One (overly) simple interpretation might be: If resistant political action is obsolete or futile anyway, then theoretical reflection on politics certainly is. On closer examination, however, the situation is more complex, and it is possible that the blank space indicates in a serious way that the relationship between Critical Theory and politics or political theory is inherently problematic. The abstinence would then not be due to a resigned disinterest. Rather, we are possibly dealing here with a constellation of ambivalence that is based on the *dialectical nature of the object itself* – of politics.

Adorno's reflection from his philosophical fragments on the connection between politics and *ideology* points in this direction:

On the one hand, the entire sphere of politics is certainly an aspect of ideology, that is to say, it seems as if the power struggles take place in the political sphere proper – the sphere of government, the sphere of legislation, the

sphere of elections, in all these elements of political institutions – as if they were the matter itself, whereas they are epiphenomena over the real social process that carries them. It is especially difficult to see through this [...] because the things with which people are first confronted, apart from persons, are really political institutions that represent the social, and because it already demands a substantial and analytical process of abstraction to perceive the underlying play of social forces. [...] But, on the other hand, the sphere of politics as the sphere of seizing power, where it is quite possible for the entire fundamental conditions of life, especially the economic ones, to be decided, is after all a sphere, an ideology, that holds within it the potential to become something more, something different from mere ideology. (Adorno 2019, 39).

Interestingly, such a dialectical understanding of politics also seems to reflect some of the central areas of tension in the self-understanding of Critical Theory (or the respective discourse). Thus, in a certain sense, it corresponds to the uncertainty regarding the so-called "*prohibition of pictures*" in relation to utopias, which, contrary to what is often circulated, can be considered quite controversial (Chrostowska 2019).⁶ This uncertainty probably emerges most succinctly in one of Adorno's conversations with Ernst Bloch. While Adorno initially argues for "the prohibition of casting a picture of utopia actually for the sake of utopia" (Adorno in Bloch 1988, 11), only a few pages later he recognizes something "very intricate" in the prohibition of pictures:

[T]his matter also has a very confounding aspect, for something terrible happens due to the fact that we are forbidden to cast a picture. To be precise, among that which should be definite, one imagines it to begin with as less definite the more it is stated only as something negative. But then – and this is probably even more frightening – the commandment against a concrete expression of utopia tends to defame the utopian consciousness and to engulf it. What is really important, however, is the will that it is different. (Adorno in Bloch 1988, 12).

Equally related to politics – or the concept of

⁵ An exception is Horkheimer's concise essay *The Authoritarian State*, first published in 1942 (Horkheimer 1973).

⁶ Accordingly, there are also positive connections to utopian thinking in the field of Critical Theory, see especially Benhabib (1986) or most recently Chrostowska and Ingram (2017).

politics – and equally characterized by an internal dialectical tension, is the idea of *progress*, which, at the latest with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, has a prominent status as an object of investigation to be problematized and which once again also drives the current debates in the field of Critical Theory (Allen 2016; McCarthy 2012).⁷ Also to be understood as dialectically constituted from the perspective of Critical Theory, as well as reaching into (or touched by) all three fields mentioned – politics, utopia, progress – is the *topos of normativity*. In concrete terms, this also concerns the normativity of Critical Theory itself, since according to its own basic epistemological assumptions it can neither be normative in a simple sense, nor simply non-normative. Even if not in name, we suspect, questions of utopia, progress, and normativity that are undoubtedly formative for Critical Theory always have questions of politics in the background. Quite certainly, at any rate, an at least implicit referential connection can be assumed.

It can therefore be concluded that there was a partly direct, partly mediated interest in a critical-theoretical penetration of politics. Finally, Adorno's statement at the end of his 1963 lecture on the *Problems of Moral Philosophy* that "anything that we can call morality today merges into the question of the organization of the world. We might even say that the quest for the good life is the quest for the right form of politics" (Adorno 2000, 176). Although Adorno also doubts here "if indeed such a right form of politics lies within the realm of what can be achieved today" (ibid.), this can certainly be understood as a call to think about (good) politics in the spirit of Critical Theory.

Critical Theory of politics today: a panorama

Is the political question still relevant at a time when you cannot act politically?
— Max Horkheimer in Adorno and Horkheimer 2019, 25

Seen in this light, the project of a *Critical Theory*

of politics within the original research context around Horkheimer and Adorno might present itself somewhat differently. Not as an unintentional project that was considered pointless, but rather as an *unfinished task* that has been *postponed* until further notice. If one disregards Kirchheimer's and Neumann's peripheral contributions, however, it is only much later, with the so-called "second generation", that independent approaches to the theory of law and democracy come into play in the context of Critical Theory. Explicit reflections on political theory find their way into the (international) universe of Critical Theory in particular through the works on state, legal and democratic theory by Claus Offe (1984) and, above all, Jürgen Habermas (1996), albeit in highly different, sometimes more materialist-social-theoretical, sometimes more normative-idealist forms. While this undoubtedly represents an attempt to fill the gap or at least to make it accessible, the issue of politics ultimately remained largely under-the-matized and the diversity of existing approaches were not systematically processed.

In the remaining part of our article, we would like to venture a rough overview, a preliminary and selective *panorama*. We do so in order to explore whether and how, under current circumstances, the "classical" programmatic of Critical Theory is being taken up from the perspective of political theory in the widest sense as well as in related disciplines, and in what form a Critical Theory of politics appears today. If one takes into account that there is hardly any agreement on what the unchanging essence of politics is supposed to be, with the determination of which everything external to it is set as non-political, then it is hardly surprising that quite different paths are taken. Those are sometimes separated by deep fault lines, but at the same time in some cases also show a multitude of ramifications. The project of a Critical Theory of politics should not, of course, be opposed to this inherently divergent diversity, since it is convinced in principle of the inconclusiveness of knowledge. The heteroge-

⁷ See also the recent special section *Rethinking Progress* in *Constellations* 28, n. 1 (2021).

neity of the overview confirms, what perhaps the most significant determination of Critical Theory is in general: "There are no general criteria for judging the Critical Theory as a whole" (Horkheimer 1972, 242).

In order to be able to sound out a Critical Theory of politics today, we propose *two explorative operations*: First, we sketch out object-adequate possibilities of which different manifestations can be meant by "theory" at all. To this end, we identify five levels. We then propose to sort the confusing variety of current offers of a contemporary Critical Theory of politics into *three basic paths*. Both are done with exemplary references to current works available in English. As a matter of principle, the texts cited in each case are intended to illustrate a particular point – we do not wish to make reductive classifications of authors who all too often work on several levels and sometimes take different paths in different texts. On the whole, we are not merely being necessarily selective in our approach, but see it as imperative to formulate a clear caveat: The examples we have chosen come from European and Anglo-Saxon discourse contexts – we still have to owe an appropriate broadening of the panorama here.

Theory? What theory?

But eating roast goose is not the same thing as doing theory.
— Max Horkheimer in Adorno and Horkheimer 2019, 54)

Without claiming to be exhaustive, we propose five levels that we encounter more frequently in current debates about a contemporary Critical Theory. These are *theoricity, aspiration, programmatic, theoretical methodology, and temporal core*. Now to the individual levels:

(a) In sufficiently heterogeneous and diversified debate contexts such as the one we are interested in here, even the most elementary questions and apparent self-evident facts come under scrutiny: Is a Critical Theory something like "pure theory"? The alternative to theory, also in view of the dilemmas already mentioned that plagued the

first generation of the Frankfurt School, would obviously be a retreat to singular political interventions that would have to be primarily strategic and interest-driven. The typical response, on the other hand, aims at mediation and might read thus: Theory *as* practice, theory *as* interference, theory *as* political intervention. In the cosmos of current Critical Theory with a political claim, this position can be found, for example, in Cooke (2020a) and Freyenhagen (2014), both following Adorno. Such a Critical Theory of politics is thus decidedly performative, or to be found with Marx "in a hand-to-hand fight", and deliberately gets its hands dirty. Whether "beautiful purity" or "down in the dirt" – this question arises not only in political practice but also at the theoretical level itself, above all in the confrontation between "ideal theory" and "realism", which has recently been much discussed in political theory (currently, for example, in Ferrara 2020). In the field of interest here, a particularly sharp critique of ideal theory can be found in Geuss (2008). Conversely, realism itself is hardly attacked, but rather the meaningfulness of the distinction itself (e.g. Forst 2020).

(b) As those remarks refer to the use of theorizing, which typically tends to lead away from a theory as an end in itself, nothing is said about its *claim*, about its formal scope. Löwenthal already admonished: Critical Theory is "a perspective, a common critical basic attitude toward all cultural phenomena without ever claiming to be a system" (Löwenthal in Dubiel 181, 145). This is contrasted with the claim to understand society as a totality and to consciously explain it systematically. At one end of the scale, for instance, lies Rosa's (2021) comprehensive-general, in some cases even transcultural and transhistorical claim in his theory of resonance to be able to capture more or less all (or at least the essential) social pathologies of the present. In Honneth and Fraser (2003), in particular, one finds the specified claim to capture a particular historical social formation (such as present-day liberal-capitalist societies of the "West") in its totality. At the other end, i.e. that of the lowest range claim, are singular, particular-exemplary approaches that deliberately focus

on a relatively narrowly limited subject matter. Recent examples of this, which explicitly operate as Critical Theory with a political dimension, include the reappraisals of the topics "Landscape Heritage" (Baird 2017), "Third World Films" (Gabriel 2021), and the study of self-immolation in Turkish prisons (Bargu 2014).

(c) But what about the *programmatic* nature of the theory? A revealing guiding difference is already manifested in the use of a single letter: "Critical Theory of politics" with a *capital C* or a *lowercase c*? (Saar 2017) As a rule, this marks whether one moves within the narrower tradition of the Frankfurt School or in the wider variety of critical approaches. At the same time, it can be used to express a programmatic decision that also recurs to a place, but no longer to a particular academic discipline: How should a Critical Theory of politics today relate to its classically reference object, the *genius loci* Frankfurt? Accordingly, "Frankfurt" is not only a place, but also a cipher for a traditional context. In the foreground of corresponding works, however, is usually less explicitly this debate, but rather implicit programmatics, in which the authors performatively present which thematic orientation of a critical theory of politics (or the Critical Theory of politics) would be appropriate or desirable. Naturally, the programmatic approaches are sometimes competing, sometimes complementary. In terms of programmatics, Fraser (2013) in particular argues in a decidedly intersectional way: a Critical Theory of politics today cannot avoid boldly taking up a combination of the relevant theoretical approaches and theoretical objects in the realm of social criticism – and for her, these are feminism, postcolonialism, ecology, and especially contemporary capitalism. Integrative grand theories are still lacking here, however.

(d) The various theoretical and programmatic ambitions make it necessary to approach the matter of "politics" (and in particular its normativity) also in terms of different *theoretical methodologies*, and to approach the concrete questions and objects in a specific form in each case. A basic distinction can be made according to the

dominant mode, roughly sortable into the triad construction – reconstruction – deconstruction. A *constructive* approach is advocated by Forst (2011), for example, who builds a right to justification as a critical standard, theorizing morality, reason, justice, and autonomy in particular. In a similar vein, Lafont (2020) argues for a robust deliberative democracy. A *reconstructive* approach is strongly advocated by Honneth (2015). He argues that normative standards would need to be recovered from our already lived-in legitimate laws and institutionally established practices. In this case, he is concerned with the value of freedom. The reconstructive tradition, strongly advanced by Habermas (1975, 1996), is found throughout Honneth's work, especially in his influential and widely advanced theory of recognition (Honneth 1996). A *deconstructive* approach is typically propagated either where common interests are seen with an overall philosophy of deconstructionism as represented by Jacques Derrida and fellow campaigners (Zima 2002), or where the uncovering of unexpected effects of power and subordination is sought (Allen 2007). Beyond these broad approaches, there is also a more frequent addressing of "crises" in terms of theoretical methodology (esp. Fraser 2013; 2017), as well as references to more precise methodologies such as "ideology critique" (Geuss 1981) or "genealogy" (Owen 2002) – a clear theoretical-methodological fixation thus does not seem to have established itself.

(e) One of the essential features of a theory with Frankfurt provenance is not least the postulate that every theory in its emergence, development and validity necessarily contains a *temporal core*, as Adorno and Horkheimer note in the preface to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Accordingly, Fraser (1985), for instance, fundamentally recurs to Marx's 1843 dictum of the "self-clarification [...] of the struggles and wishes of the age" (Marx 1975, 209) in order to fathom what is critical about Critical Theory. "Theory" thus becomes precisely not an entity that is as universalist as possible, but a historically embedded instance that reflects on its own conditions and applications. The presen-

t-day relevance of a Critical Theory of politics is thus not a matter of course, but must be seen as a constant, demanding and always fallible task. It must prove itself in particular by addressing both *contemporary political issues* and *contemporary problems*. From this perspective, those include, for instance, poverty (Ingram 2018), digitalization (Berry 2014), the European Union (Outhwaite 2012), climate change (Cooke 2020b), property and possession (von Redecker 2020), racism (McCarthy 2012), antisemitism (Rensmann 2017), human rights (Benhabib 2011), secularization (Lara 2013), civil disobedience (Celikates 2016), legal revolutions (Brunkhorst 2014), postcolonialism and imperialism (Kerner 2018), neoliberalism and right-wing populism (Brown 2019), or untruth in politics (Vogelmann 2020).

Constellations: confidants, elective affinities, adversaries

Simply to utter the words 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is to form an alliance with [...] Mao Zedong.
— Max Horkheimer in Adorno and Horkheimer 2019, 39

How can, should or must the rich tradition of Frankfurt Critical Theory be dealt with in view of today's political challenges – despite or because of its original constellation of political ambivalence? If one looks at relevant works that can plausibly be counted among the field of a Critical Theory of politics, the impression is that there can hardly be any question of a gap, as was perhaps the case historically. At the same time, however, there is not one answer that has prevailed, or one systematic theory that takes up all the relevant questions, or even one clearly identifiable academic discipline. Rather, we are dealing with a *multifaceted diversity* of contributions that is not always easy to keep track of. In order to sort out this field in a simplifying way and to make rough lines recognizable, we propose to identify *three major paths* of a contemporary Critical Theory of politics:

(1) A *deepening* of the direction taken by the second generation of the Frankfurt School in the second half of the twentieth century; this means

following up on the great philosopher Jürgen Habermas (esp. 1996; 1999), who, through his turn in communication theory, strongly oriented Critical Theory in the direction of constructivist justice theory, deliberative democratic theory and liberal political theory, and thus achieved discourse sovereignty for the newer Critical Theory. (2) A *reorientation*, i.e. a change of course towards new theoretical shores; this means that a continuation of the emancipative intentions of Critical Theory today can only be regarded as meaningful and appropriate if the orientation is substantially changed or incorporates such Critical Theory elements that clearly lie beyond the Frankfurt School. (3) A *return* to original but seemingly outmoded or even forgotten motifs; that is, recommending or updating guarantors of the Frankfurt School, or even its theoretical precursors, for the solution of contemporary political questions.

The consideration of which concrete paths are to be taken for a Critical Theory of politics today is quite essentially at the same time the choice of who would be the right company on the way (or not): on whom from the tradition can one rely, which historical and current allies should be sought out, who are unreliable fellows to be eyed carefully, and with which figures should one rather change sides of the street? Theory is thus typically embodied in *reference authors*. These can be distinguished *cum grano salis* according to whether they belong to the "canon" of the Frankfurt School in the narrower sense (a), or (historically and factually) stand outside it (b). The choice of path and possible allies creates certain tensions of principle, which we will also briefly outline (c).

(a) With regard to the "canon", a double caveat seems immediately appropriate: First, even a seemingly clear and comparatively overseeable canon is not exactly a self-evident object. In this section we refer only to the "Frankfurters" of the first generation, i.e. those researchers who worked at the Institute for Social Research in its founding years, and in its immediate environment. Historical predecessors – who certainly constitute a substantive "essence" of the Frankfurt

School – will be addressed in the next section. Secondly, the majority of works on the (politics of the) Frankfurt School consist of works *about* it, rather than directly following it.

If one now turns one's gaze resolutely to Frankfurt, it becomes apparent that Horkheimer's definition of the essence and programmatic orientation seems to be the classic starting point par excellence for a Critical Theory of politics and is accordingly frequently cited. Nevertheless, Horkheimer is seldom used in detail and systematically for theorizing purposes; it usually remains with the reference to the distinction between "traditional" and Critical Theory (Horkheimer 1972). The situation is different with the counterpart Adorno, who is clearly more frequently recommended as a central orientation figure (for example, Jameson 1990 or Allen 2016). Beyond Horkheimer and Adorno, the question of the canon arises most forcefully when one considers the actual history of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research; here, however, we refrain from tracing the changing personal constellations and career paths within the Institute, and provisionally assume a kind of ideal canon, constituted only in retrospective and reception. With regard to a Critical Theory of politics, this includes several classical representatives, in particular Herbert Marcuse (Brown 2019), Otto Kirchheimer and Franz Neumann (Scheuerman 1997) or Walter Benjamin (Loick 2018). Erich Fromm, Leo Löwenthal or Friedrich Pollock, for example, play only a minor role, not to mention more marginal and lesser-known figures such as Karl-August Wittfogel or Henryk Grossmann.

(b) What about *elective affinities* outside the canon? We distinguish here between historical precursors and current theoretical offerings. In the *historical* category, it is particularly striking how numerous and continuous references are made to a kind of founding father who neither really has anything to do with Frankfurt, nor can even come close to passing as a contemporary of the school there: to Karl Marx. And this is no triviality. It is particularly pronounced in the work of Nancy Fraser (1985; 2014; most recently Fraser and

Jaeggi 2018), for example, that the very essence of Critical Theory goes back, or necessarily must go back, to Marx. But even with less emphatic invocations, it quickly becomes clear: Marx is a universally popular guarantor, and apparently largely uncontroversial through many camps (contrarily, however, esp. Cohen 1982). Since Critical Theory is not without reason also classified as Freudo-Marxism (which is not least evident in the influential studies on the authoritarian character, see Adorno 1950), another precursor is obvious: Sigmund Freud, however, seems to divide opinions considerably more; Amy Allen's *Critique on the Couch* (2021; see also Bottici and Kühner 2012) currently makes a strong plea for a decisive role of psychoanalysis also in political questions. Other precursors vehemently recommended as foundations of a Critical Theory of politics are, first and foremost, Kant (Forst 2011), Hegel (Honneth 2015), and Nietzsche (Brown 2019), and more rarely Rousseau (Ferrara 2017) – obviously not guarantors who can be followed simultaneously.

Among the desired *newer and current allies* and elective affinities, the diversification becomes even greater. We can only selectively list the numerous attempts at connection here, and, despite multiple ties, limit ourselves to only one exemplary reference in each case. But even so, a multifaceted panorama already emerges. Among the currently recommended guarantors are, for instance, the following exceedingly heterogeneous thinkers and approaches: Karl Polanyi (Fraser 2017), Niklas Luhmann and systems theory (Schechter 2021), Michel Foucault (Allen 2016), Gilles Deleuze (Saar 2020a), Hannah Arendt (Volk 2016), feminism (Fraser 2013), Jacques Derrida (Zima 2002), Luc Boltanski and pragmatism (Celikates 2018), John Rawls (Forst 2011), Charles Taylor (Rosa 2021), Judith Shklar (Heins 2019), postcolonialism (Kerner 2018), John Dewey (Honneth 2017), Enrique Dussel (Mendieta 2007), or Judith Butler and queer theory (Allen 2007).

(c) These divergent options lead us to *controversies and antagonisms*. If the Critical Theory of politics were a dogma, a sect, or a consensus program, it would seek the theoretical dispute

only externally. However, it is far too diverse, too ambiguous, and too heterogeneous to do without considerable internal disagreement. In our opinion, however, the controversies are by no means a deficit, as they ultimately make the debate with the tradition and between the protagonists all the more spirited, which is beneficial for the level of the theoretical debate.

The main disputes over direction lie between the three paths of *deepening*, *reorientation* and *return* mentioned above. There seems to be fierce competition between the camp of deepening (1), which in the recent past has probably been most prominent in political theory, and the camp of reorientation (2), which urges theoretical re-adjustment and seeks to expose and repel the supposed heresies. The reorientation camp is dominated by a somewhat diffuse current which, on the basis of major overlaps, could probably best be described *cum grano salis* as the "post-camp" – with regard to Critical Theory, these are primarily post-structuralism (Saar 2020b), post-Marxism (Garlitz and Zompetti 2021) and post-colonialism (Ingram 2020) – while the deepening camp could probably be put on the name with a broadly understood *liberalism*. This seems to us to be the *dominant cleavage* of a contemporary Critical Theory of politics. In particular, the questions invoked above about the (im-)possibility of normative standards, a clearly ascertainable progress, or even the translation of theory into political institutions play an essential role, with the post-camp typically taking the skeptical, and liberalism the emphatically affirmative position. Interestingly, an internal split can be seen in the return camp (3) – it is by no means uncontroversial which tradition should actually be recollected. Here, for example, references to mostly negative positions following Adorno and Marcuse on the one hand, and rather institution-theoretical continuations with Neumann and Kirchheimer on the other, are opposed to each other. The same applies to orientations to Freud and Nietzsche, or to Kant and Hegel (in each case with considerable

differences between them).

But here, too, the simplistically depicted situation is more complex; there are not simply two clear fronts irreconcilably opposed to each other. On the one hand, there are *other options*, such as the somewhat neo-Aristotelian or communitarian camp oriented towards the "good life" (e. g. Rosa 2021). And on the other hand, there are both attempts at *mediation* (for instance between post-structuralism and the good life from the perspective of Critical Theory, see Cooke 2006), and debates that not infrequently imply or at least enable fruitful exchange and rapprochement. Some time ago, for example, there was the "dialogue between genealogy and Critical Theory" (Ashenden and Owen 1998), respectively the debate between the followers of Foucault and Habermas, which was also conducted elsewhere. Most recently, the critical encounter between the paradigms of recognition and disagreement (Honneth and Rancière 2016) is one of the more prominent cases in this regard.⁸ Overall, however, the debates, disputes, and controversies remain lively and unabatedly productive.

Final considerations

In this article, we have, on the one hand, elaborated in detail the fundamental constellation of ambivalence of the early Frankfurt School on politics. On the other hand, we wanted to show that there are a variety of promising approaches to a Critical Theory of politics today. To this end, we have listed selected elements of theorization, proposed a rough sorting on the basis of the three paths of deepening, reorientation and return, and tentatively named current reference authors. In doing so, we had relied on English-language literature, and moved very much within an "occidental" discourse of theory, especially US-American and German. Critical Theory, however, is not without time and place; it must, with Marx, strive for a self-understanding of the struggles and desires of the present and in the respective melees, in order to be able to contribute to more

⁸ See also the Special Issue *Jacques Rancière and Critical Theory* of the *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 27, n°. 2 (2019).

emancipation – in the field of politics this seems to be particularly called for. If these lines are published in a Brazilian journal, there is of course a need to say something about Brazil's political conditions from the perspective of a Critical Theory. However, we do not want to presume to be able to do this adequately, being (self-)critically conscious though of the hegemonies beneath such apologies. It only remains for us to point out that the foundations are laid in the contributions in this special issue (or the bridges that can be crossed, e.g. the contribution of Ina Kerner). There are more than enough occasions, and it is not surprising that analyses of the current political situation begin with an invocation of Adorno (for example, Bittar 2021). We look forward to a lively and fruitful debate, and hope for corresponding political actions.

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