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On the Re-Formation of Critical Knowledge

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Translated by Gerrit Jackson

In the 1970s, Foucault could arrive at the diagnosis that the universities had become ultra-sensitive zones because their power-effects were undergoing multiplication and amplification, as virtually all intellectuals passed through them (cf. Foucault 1977). Today, thirty years later, the power-effects of universities have certainly not abated, and have likely even increased in some aspects, but the struggles have shifted; despite all discussions concerning inter-, trans-, and post-disciplinarity, today's struggles are hardly fought over the scientifically and theoretically sound design of disciplines, over contents to be taught, research projects to be installed, or university-level teaching positions to be filled with qualified faculty. Expectations regarding such processes have diminished in a general dismantling of potentials: to cut expenses is to govern. The ongoing changes at the university effectively amount to yet another alteration of the working conditions of, and the epistemic form for, critical intellectuals and critical materialist theory. First and foremost, there is the fact that the generation of teachers appointed during the expansion of the universities in the late 1960s is now retiring from them. This enables university leaderships to put a stop to, or at least to weaken for a longer time

and more decisively than in the past, the project of a critical social theory by recruiting affirmatively minded scientists. It is increasingly impossible to maintain structural contexts for discussion within universities. Modular design of curricula transforms university studies into a sort of school, and the focus on educational targets of practical value in the labor market as well as the concomitant introduction of BA curricula and tuition fees compels students to assimilate canonized bodies of knowledge with efficiency and determination. The space for a self-determined and free-roaming acquisition of knowledge, by pursuit of one's curiosity and conceptual questions arising from matter itself, becomes narrower. In a complementary development, universities are made fit for competition. As a consequence, disciplines, curricula, and teachers are evaluated and homogenized in accordance with general qualitative standards. In this competition, performance targets and benchmarks dynamically move ever further up, making evaluation a permanent institution. The results are growing administrations as well as ever-increasing efforts to acquire outside founding. Add to that the consequences of modularized teaching and an increasing number of exams, and many university teachers find no or only little time for scientific work. The general level of this work aside, this will in time bring down also the scientific standard of the teaching itself.

It has become more difficult if not, in many respects, impossible for a critical materialist theory of society to reproduce itself within the university. With the reorganization of the academic field of knowledge, its alliance with critical theory is dissolved. In many disciplines, such as economics and law, or literary studies, psychology, and philosophy, where critical theoretical formations were at least nascent, these seem to have largely disappeared; in others, such as sociology, political science, or history, they have

been marginalized. That is not to say, as it were, that there aren't individuals who contribute to a critical materialist theory. But in all likelihood even they can do so increasingly only as a side job divorced from their main work as mediators of largely predetermined modular units of knowledge, evaluators, grant application writers, and managers and administrators of science. Critical work occurs predominantly as a supplement to other activities, engaged in after hours, and does not lead into an identifiable conjunction between teaching, discussions, the promotion of junior academics, theory-formation, and empirical research.

If we think not from the perspective of the university but take our cue from the traditions and epistemic forms of critical social theory —ranging from Helvetius and Condorcet, de Gouches and Wollstonecraft, across Weitling and Marx, Luxemburg and Lukács, Gramsci, Horkheimer, Adorno, Sartre and Beauvoir, to Althusser, Foucault, Deleuze, and many others I cannot mention here—then the question is a different one. For quite generally speaking, there cannot be any doubt that in a society crossed by social antagonisms, with coerced surplus labor, the private appropriation of social labor, the polarization of poor and rich, ecological problems that remain unsolved, with criminalization and psychiatrization, with processes that dismantle democracy, and with the exploitation of the south, critique and critical theory will continue to exist. But what was historically a matter of course, their affiliation with the university, will not. The sphere of the problems of critique, its concepts, criteria of relevance, and specific objects and the manner of theoretical-empirical analysis will emerge in the future. A new epistemic form will arise for which, as for many other social constellations, the network may seem to become the relevant model (cf. Boltanski/Chiapello 2005), that is

to say, a largely inter- and transnational interconnection of intellectual debates and post-disciplinary theoretical and political work comprising conceptual reflection, empirical research, experiential reporting, and new forms of cultural practice, and including individual scientists at universities as well as journalists and journal editorial staff, free research groups and institutes, militant research contexts, non-governmental organizations, or think tanks. Lives take discontinuous paths, and the fields of one's work change. Work is frequently done in projects, with shorter or longer phases of employment, scientific work merges into political work and vice versa, there is a great mobility and flexibility with respect to spatial movement, social contacts, thematic threads, and activities. The university still has a role to play in this, insofar as time and again it makes resources available and individual university affiliates are connected to these networks and projects. But the university loses its significance as the site where critical knowledge can be produced and reproduced. The marginalization and exclusion of critical approaches is not the least important factor in reducing the university's internationality and its ability to innovate.

Yet it would be overly partial to emphasize only positive aspects. The disadvantages are obvious. There is a precarization of intellectual and critical work; instead of planning one's life and forming assured expectations, a complicated management of one's emotional relations with long-distance partners and friends and colleagues who live scattered far and wide becomes necessary. Even spatial mobility is precarious, as it depends on resources that may not be available. This limits or threatens one's chances of maintaining contacts and the ability to communicate and cooperate. Those who engage in this intellectual work can often do so only on the side, next to a breadwinning job, or have to move

from project to project frequently and quickly. The procurement of resources takes great effort and in turn limits the space devoted to the respective project's work proper. The funding for the projects themselves is often insufficient and frequently granted for unrealistically short terms. Theory-formation and empirical research, often commissioned by patrons close to political parties, trade unions, or non-governmental organizations, threaten to become short-winded.[1] Stable competencies may not fully emerge as the rapid alternation of projects and thematic fields instead compels a superficial acquaintance, an avoidance of too close ties to acquired knowledge, let alone experience. From the pressure to become acquainted quickly with different fields arises the danger of dilettantism; at the same time, there is no longer a social locus for research that would comprehensively investigate an object. Methodological problems, too, are quite serious: the dissolution of the order of disciplines has a disorienting effect, the canon of knowledge and references becomes unstable. Theory tends toward empiricism, as many theories of individual areas of society and logics of action are formed without a reasonable expectation that they can be reduced to a single universal logic—that of economics or language—leaving the problem of their interconnection. If the presumption is that theories are mere tools in order to treat a specific object, renunciation of the attempt to think an interconnected whole suggests itself.

Yet theory is something substantially other than an instrument; it is the form in which thinking, disclosing the world in advance of action, takes shape in order to give direction and measure, impose standards and limits on this action. Out of a fear, not unfounded, of theory's totalization, its reducing complex relations to certain aspects, the project of critical social theory is sacrificed from the outset by the understanding of theory and science; its possibilities,

it is said, are highly limited—a claim that were not false if it were complemented by the realization that the limits of practice are even narrower. Yet there is the inverse danger, too: in order not to lose sight of an interconnected whole, and due to a lack of resources (individuals, time, money, competences, research institutions), questionable research foci are framed which, as though by virtue of a metaphysical key, are supposed to give rise to an explanation of the entire spectrum of social developments. For instance, the fact is often overlooked that economism itself was a rational knowledge practice, if certainly one that had its limitations, insofar as it created an order of priority for the small scientific community. And so it is not by accident that it was only with the gradual establishment of critical sociological knowledge inside the university that the political and cultural modes of authority also became objects of detailed study. All of these (weak structural contexts of discussion, discontinuous work, insufficient material resources, methodological and epistemological equivocation) are conditions prejudicial to intellectual work.

Is there one point of view that encompasses the historical phases of intellectual and critical theory-formation and of epistemic forms—the critique of religion and of manners, journalism, the critique of political economy along party lines, the university-based and culturally critical nonconformism of critical intellectuals, and finally the nascent new form of networked, post-disciplinary, nomadic critical practices? This is not just about the description of four or five phases of social critique; the question arises: what of the emancipatory momentum, what of the progress of emancipation? The entire tradition of critical thinking discerned this momentum and this progress in a state where all would have access to the social conditions of the possibility of the production of universal knowledge; would be able to appropriate the competences

necessary for intellectual work and to exercise them; and would participate in the pleasure and delight of insight—and thought that, in the end, to reach this goal, the social division of labor would have to be changed in its entirety. In times of crisis of the production and reproduction of critical knowledge—as is the case with economic crises—what ensues is a reorganization of intellectual production, on new and higher levels of its socialization and of cooperation (cf. for this argument O'Connor 1988). International cooperation is distinctly expanded, and in Europe, transnational research networks and exchanges are formed; it is a matter of course that intellectuals from the South participate in global scientific discussions and contribute to the dissolution of the transatlantic North's monopoly on science. Likewise, feminist, gender, and queer theories have displaced the perspectives of a critical theory of society with lasting effects. Individuals throng into the tertiary education system in increasing numbers, and women have caught up with men both in numbers and in their performance. Despite the general cult of youth, formalized learning can no longer be biographically limited to youth and young adulthood. The sciences lose the ability to assert a linear and merely objectifying knowledge, they lose the authoritarian power to compel agreement, and become the field of controversies. As the sciences are experienced as a social and political power in the scientized processes of everyday work and life, debates ensue over their meaning and status. Against the disciplinary subjection of scientific knowledge under the rule of disciplines over what can and cannot be said, critical practices of scientific work and knowledge arise. The lines of demarcation drawn by the university between the sciences and the lives of laypeople are suffering a drastic loss of plausibility. That becomes a problem when exploited by contempt for the sciences and rationality; when any commonsensical religious belief or everyday understanding, when spiritualism and religion, to

advance their own status, can in an anti-intellectual move discard theoretical and systematic analyses as mere opinionation. Yet this dissolution can assume emancipatory significance when everyday understanding comes under pressure from scientific argument and loses the power that lies in its seeming a matter of course. Even knowledge that is for sale, knowledge under the conditions of the culture industry, can develop a democratizing impact because, as a salable commodity, it is equally accessible to all and loses much of the aura of academic sacralization. As its quality must withstand continuous reevaluation, knowledge is also opened up to criticism of its disciplinary design, its canon, its theories and hypotheses, the manner in which it is mediated. It seems that the development of societies has contributed to the disappearance of privileged sites of critical theory and insight. Who would deny that this entails the danger, again and in a manner perhaps even more fundamental than during the 1930s, of weakening the conditions of the possibility of the existence of the natural subjects of reason, and the potential of critical theory? Yet at the same time, the points of departure multiply for an emancipatory politics of truth; for battles against educational privilege and against the most profound form of the social division of labor: that of intellectual and physical work; and for the production and assertion of critical theoretical knowledge. It is one of the insights of earlier phases of critical knowledge that this critical knowledge is itself not an unproblematic given; that the preservation of earlier, and the production of new, critical knowledge requires specific labor. By recalling these facts, the present considerations hope to stimulate the search for new roads to be traveled, just as those before us have trod new paths.

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[1] These developments are of great consequence for the union movement, which in my view has not yet taken them seriously enough even though, especially in the field of economics, it has been confronted with them for some time. For during the past decades, it could rely on a socially critical knowledge made comprehensively available to it, as though a matter of course, by critical scientists and researchers. Even when this knowledge required financial support, that is to say, was not available as freely accessible public property, there were the well-trained scientists. That is the case no longer, or less and less. This renders the union movement more dependent on the dominant, and expensive, knowledge of experts; or, where it becomes distrustful, the danger of intellectual self-limitation arises. Strategic discussions become short-winded and lose complexity. Something similar obtains for leftist contexts. They have profited since the 1960s from a continuous exchange of scientific knowledge and staff with the university. What has long been an advantage might become a special disadvantage, as the university has been a focal site for the German left after 1968. If it loses this focal point, the left will suffer a disproportionate impairment. The critique of capitalism might fall back to the stage of moralizing and good intentions. The left would be weakened by lacking the wide horizon of scientifically systematic knowledge.