WITHIN THE SHELL OF THE OLD

ON CRITICAL THEORY

AND PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

BY

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*It's a difficult business, creating
a new, alternative civilization*
– David Graeber

Introduction

This paper puts forward an immanent critique of Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi's immanent critique of capitalism. As it stands, Fraser and Jaeggi's proposal for a critique of capitalism is subject to a Hegelian pitfall: critique alone, even if normatively salient, cannot facilitate a transformation of society along the normative standards it bemoans. Only the transformation of society itself can empower a critique of the bemoaned circumstances and endow the critique with transformational

potency. After introducing the relevant aspects of the left-Hegelian underbelly of contemporary Critical Theory I dissect Fraser and Jaeggi's critique of capitalism understood as the critique of a 'form of life' into its constitutive components. I then address a further problem: even if there are social practices with which Critical Theory can assume 'unity', we don't know how to identify the 'right' social movements. If you listen carefully to white supremacists, for instance, they too have a victim narrative. So, how can we, the Critical Theorists, single out the 'good' social movements? I will conclude by proposing an alternative approach to critique, one that works genealogically and prefiguratively, capable of emancipating Critical Theory from its Hegelian heritage.

I

In search for something to hold on to

Critique, Robin Celikates (2018, 1) advises, referring to Marx, "has to be based in an analysis of social reality and its contradictions, and can only find its criteria in the social practices, struggles, experiences, and self-understandings to which it is connected". Critical Theory is an emancipatory theory: critique supports oppressed groups by enabling them to clarify and designate the inner workings of their struggle and helps them transform the situation. Theory alone, however, is so to speak 'transformatively impotent': if reality is the 'midwife', as Engels (1877) put it, then theory is the midwife's assistant. Reality can only be changed by *real* forces; intellectualisms can only help us understand and thereby contribute to a social transformation that is already under way. This opens up questions about the theory-practice relation; about what it means for critique to have transformative potential in the first place. In other words: can theory change the world, and if so, how?

Critical theory, when done the right way, is as much receiving input from social reality as it is a form of social practice itself. While traditional theory did offer piecemeal critique of singular elements within societal structures, a critical theory takes the whole structure of society as its object of critique. It seeks to transform the structure and thereby emancipate the agents caught inside. Rather than promoting "a division of labor [...] in social conflicts" (Horkheimer 1972, 222), critical theory must enter assume *unity* with those social conflicts. According to Horkheimer, this unity with social practice makes a theory "not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change" (*ibid.*, 215). Critical Theory becomes the "continuation, by means of a controlled scientific methodology, of the cognitive labor that oppressed groups have to perform in their everyday struggles when they work to de-naturalize hegemonic patterns of interpretation and to expose the interests by which these are motivated" (Honneth 2017, 919). But what precisely does it take for a theory to stimulate such change?

Horkheimer's contentions are undeniably placed on top of a vast (left-)Hegelian underbelly. From Hegel, to Marx, to the Frankfurt School, to contemporary Neo-Critical Theory, critique seeks to escape the 'empty ought' of ineffectual (liberal) moralism by searching for the inner normativity of historical reality itself. As Marx puts it: "the weapons of critique will never replace the critique of weapons […] the material force must be overthrown by material force, which theory, too, can become, once it seizes the masses" (1976, 385, my translation).[1] This remark stresses the

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[1] The German original reads: "Die Waffe der Kritik kann allerdings die Kritik der Waffe nicht ersetzen; die materielle Gewalt muß gestürzt werden durch

materialist commitments of the (left-)Hegelian tradition: critique must latch on to something material, a social movement, for instance, in order to (at least in principle) gain transformative or subversive momentum within social reality. The nominalisms of theory alone are weak and feeble.

It might be considered comical to back up a point about social transformation with a reference to Horkheimer. It was his original Critical Theory agenda (1937), however, which picked up on Hegelian core-commitments. For Hegel, critique is the "embodiment of a reason that realizes itself in history" (Jaeggi 2005, 77). Hegelian critique acquires its transformative momentum by assuming this unity with the dialectical self-unfolding of real contradictions [*Wirklichkeit*] pushing towards reconciliation (i.e., the *Aufhebung* [sublation]).

To put this in more schematic terms, Horkheimer's (1937) critical theory project starts from a situation in which a norm is accepted and simultaneously a certain practice is enacted, but norm and enactment are in conflict.[2] One of the most pertinent examples is Marx's analysis of 'double-freedom'. Marx reminds us that every proletarian is free to sell her labour to any capitalist she wants to, and that she can also decide to *not* to sell her labour (to any specific capitalist), but this creates a sense of 'double-freedom': the *norm* of freedom, the freedom of contract, conflicts with the worker's experience of unfreedom, the *practice* of unfreedom'. The proletarian worker is free to starve, but that's about as far as her freedom goes: norm and practice are in perpetual conflict.

Critique which seeks to identify situations of conflict between norm and practice, such as the conflict between *de jure* freedom and

materielle Gewalt, allein auch die Theorie wird zur materiellen Gewalt, sobald sie die Massen ergreift." (Marx, 1976, 385)

[2] Cf. Honneth 2003, 2015 on factual and justified norms.

de facto unfreedom of the workers in capitalist society, are usually thought to have acquired a sense of 'immanence' (cf. Walzer 1993). Traditional theory, on the other hand, is normativistic (*normativistisch*) in establishing some abstract norm by which social reality is being assessed.[3] If we take the unity of social theory and social practice as our desideratum for the transformative potential of social and political theory, normativistic theory falls short of being transformative.[4] The transformative potential of immanent critique is arguably anchored in contradictory reality, in reality being such that norms and practices are in conflict.[5] Critique acquires its transformative momentum by forming a unity with the dialectical self-unfolding of real contradictions [*Wirklichkeit*] pushing towards reconciliation (i.e., the *Aufhebung* [sublation]). That's the Hegelian underbelly worth shedding.

II

In the absence of emancipatory interest

What happens when critical theorists can no longer "identify struggles of oppressed groups which could serve as [its] point of

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[3] Normativism is a term of art of the Critical Theory tradition first introduced by Hans Sluga (2014), used to describe a form of theory (or critique) which demands for a normative element to be introduced from the external (cf. Jaeggi, 2009: 238).

[4] To be clear, through *Aufhebung* both norm and practice will be transformed and strive towards alignment. However, this reassembling may not necessarily resolve in a harmonious relationship, but in any case, in a *transformed* relationship: amelioration is not a given.

[5] After all, Marxism (and Hegelianism and so the Frankfurt School project, for that matter), as Ágnes Heller was keen to repeat, is metaphysics.

reference in practice", asks Celikates (2018, 208)? Critical Theory is in a predicament. That's its Hegelian hereditary load. With there being no social movements with which to unite, with there being nothing material to 'latch on to,' Critical Theory will always find itself incapable of endorsing any serious attempt at a transforming the *status quo*. What is more, a point that is rarely discussed, even if theorists find social movements in reality, how can we choose between them? If you listen carefully to white supremacists, for instance, they too have a victim narrative. On what grounds then can we distinguish emancipatory movements from their opposite, regressive movements? What if all of a sudden the totality of social reality regresses?

The destruction of political space through fascism was such that it "seemed to throw critical theory back upon itself. […] Social struggles, if they have not turned regressive seemed to have been neutralized by being preempted, integrated, or co-opted," says Calikates (*ibid.*). Honneth (2017, 66) considers the impending possibility of material ungroundedness an existential threat to the idea of a critical theory: "in the absence of […] an emancipatory interest on the part of the entire species, the demand for social progress would remain a merely moral 'ought,' lacking any support in historical reality. […] Without some form of proof that its critical perspective is reinforced by a need or a movement within social reality, Critical Theory cannot be further pursued in any way today, for it would no longer be capable of distinguishing itself from other models of social critique in its claim to a superior sociological explanatory substance or in its philosophical procedures of justification."

This pessimistic withdrawal from social reality, the loss of confidence in a directed unfolding of dialectical history, and the absence of some identifiable agent of social transformation cleared the way for Habermasian normativism through which the program

of *critical* theory became largely indistinguishable from *traditional* (i.e. liberal, normativistic) theory (cf. Stahl 2017).

Decades after the seeming decline of Critical Theory's emancipatory forces, Neo-Critical Theorists today, says Celikates, who is very much part of this comeback, re-emphasizes the importance for Critical Theory to uphold unity with "pre-theoretical experiences, oppositional forms of consciousness, and actually existing practices of critique and resistance" (*ibid.*). Giving up on this material connection – the unity between theory and practice – is unacceptable, for that would turn the Critical Theory project into "a piece of dead scholarship, a matter of complete indifference to us as living minds and active, living human beings," as Adorno said (2001: 6). The possibility of the absence of emancipatory interest, however, is the lasting predicament of Critical Theory. Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi's (2018) critique of capitalism, as I will now argue, falls prey to this Hegelian heritage-trap.

III

Understanding capitalism (the expanded view)

Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi wish to resuscitate Critical Theory, and more precisely Critical Theory's critique of capitalism. Their discussion of the ills of capitalism starts with the observation that since the inter-war period, Western societies have never been as crisis-prone as they are today (cf. Benhabib 2018). The economy and social order have once again become unstable and unpredictable. This, Fraser and Jaeggi think, calls for a revitalisation of Critical Theory and its critique of capitalism.

On the one hand, they argue that a critique of capitalism is always a form of critique which strives towards theoretical totality; it requires an all-encompassing social theory, and it has to be a rejection of the piecemeal social engineering of the liberal analytic tradition and certain currents in late twentieth-century and contemporary Critical Theory (*ibid.*, 51-59).[6] Returning to a critique of capitalism understood as an all-encompassing social theory, Critical Theory could potentially halt its descent into the shoals of status-quo apologetic, liberal-mainstream political philosophy. Fraser and Jaeggi's ambitions are twofold: first, dismantle and overcome capitalism, and second, rescue Critical Theory from its 'abyss.'

Their point of entry, as mentioned above, is crisis: Fraser puts an emphasis on the structural reasons behind a myriad of crisis tendencies inside capitalist social totality, based on class, sex, gender, ability, but also, and somewhat idiosyncratically, on our promethean relationship with nature (*ibid.*, 135). Jeaggi, on the other hand, operates with the notion of a *Lebensform* [a form of life]; a concept that she coined in her 2014 book *Kritik an Lebensformen* (Critique of Forms of Life). Capitalism, for Jaeggi, is a form of life, a historically situated ensemble of social practices, some of which are economic, others which are cultural or political. The core of her analysis of the capitalist form of life is much closer aligned with Marxian orthodoxy than is Fraser's, who urges us to look behind Marx's 'hidden abodes', those back-stories of social reproduction

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[6] Elsewhere, Jaeggi & Loick (2017: 322) described this as the black-box approach to social analysis and critique. The black-box approach to capitalism describes the tendency, as Jaeggi puts it, to only talk about how wealth inside an economic system is to be distributed, normatively speaking. Jeaggi criticizes this approach, saying that it fails to discuss *how* this wealth is being produced and *what* kind of wealth is being produced, and whether our answers are currently, normatively speaking, acceptable, and, if they are not, what could be a desirable alternative.

and primitive accumulation that are curtained largely unproblematized behind the front-story of capitalist production (cf. Fraser 2014, 39-43).

Feminist thought, postcolonialism, and ecology are largely absent from both the early and the late works of Critical Theory, Fraser argues, and are only now finding their ways into the canon.[7] Without those impulses, a systematic analysis and critique of capitalism will fail to live up to its own standards, she argues.[8] As Fraser (2014, 56) suggested elsewhere, "we lack conceptions of capitalism and capitalist crisis that are adequate to our time." Marx

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[7] One of the reviewer's has raised an interesting point here to which I will respond. Both Fraser and Jaeggi formulate critiques of capitalism – in Fraser's case, regarding reproduction and ecology, in Jaeggi's case regarding cultural struggles about forms of life – that are at issue in many contemporary social movements. Therefore, it's not clear why they fail in being sufficiently connected. To that I'd respond we must point out the historical contingency of this fact. Adorno's pessimism was very clear about that: the point is not whether there are, or are not, emancipatory movements around with which to enter in this dialogue. The point is the contingency of lack or absence of those social movements. The normative power of Critical Theory depends on the historical circumstances (strongly normative in times of Fridays for Future; hardly normative at all in times of Nazi rule).

[8] While Fraser's observation might be correct for what concerns Critical Theory, it is quite certainly not correct with respect to what concerns Marxism more broadly construed. Marxists, in the broad sense, such as Nyerere, Fanon, Lenin, Luxemburg, Bukharin, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh have written extensively on anti-imperialism and decolonization. Marx himself was writing on ecology (cf. Kohei Saito, 2017). Luxemburg, Bebel, and Zetkin, to name only a few German Social Democrats, have written on women's liberation. Fraser could have referred to those thinkers while expanding the narrow circles of Critical Theory. This would not only have weakened Frasers case against the frontispieces of the Frankfurt School, but also helped eradicate the misleading impression that Marxist thinkers are unduly focused on wage-labour.

gave us the front-story about production and exploitation, now we must look behind that, at the back-stories of reproduction and expropriation. Later in the conversation, we sense a certain de-economification of capitalism: "by revealing [capitalism's] dependence on the non-economic backgrounds of social reproduction, ecology, and public power we stress the latter's weight and societal importance, as well as their capacity to impact and indeed to destabilize historical entrenched regimes of accumulation," says Fraser (*ibid.*, 48).

Fraser and Jaeggi agree that (1) capitalism is a *form of life*; (2) that this *form of life* can claim totality (i.e., it encompasses all aspects of the social world)[9]; (3) that this *form of life* is characterized by a certain set of practices that pertain to class, gender, sex, ability, and our relationship with nature; that those practices are engrained in institutional structures; (4) that those practices can be both distinctly financial, economic, cultural, ecological, or political, but also all of that at the same time; (5) that, chiefly, this capitalist *form of life* is prone to crisis; and, (6) most importantly perhaps for this paper, that the fact that capitalism *qua* institutionalized *form of life* is crisis-prone makes capitalism worthy of critique.

IV

Criticizing capitalism

Is there something systematically at odds with capitalism? Can we find grounds for a critique that is uniquely related to capitalism, and not first and foremost a critique of something else, such as a critique of modernity, for instance, or the *conditio humana* in general? Yes, capitalism is crisis-prone, but on what grounds can we criticize

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[9] And, we might say, some aspects of the natural world as well, given that capitalism has already and irreversibly infiltrated the natural world.

a proclivity towards crisis? Capitalism can be criticized from different angles, all of which expose a unique ill of the capitalist form of life. We may criticize capitalism because it is unjust, irrational, and dysfunctional, says Jaeggi (2017).[10] Let me briefly introduce and then go through each in more detail:

First, the *functional* critique: capitalism as a social and economic system is intrinsically dysfunctional and crisis-prone.

Second, the *moral* or justice-based critique: capitalism withholds from us the fruits of our own labor and entraps us in servitude to a system that *expropriates* and *exploits* us.

Third, the *ethical* critique: a life shaped by capitalism is impoverished, alienated, and destroys essential components of what makes the good – and truly free – life.

A functional critique problematizes some of the economic or non-economic sources of functional crisis (2018, 116-120). For Jaeggi, the crisis-theorem of the immiseration thesis (or pauperization thesis*,* as it is sometimes called) is a possible contender for an economic functional critique. The detrimental effects of capitalism on our physical and mental health, or the depletion of nature's resources it fosters, are the grounds for a non-economic functional critique, Nancy Fraser adds to it.

The crisis-theorem of the immiseration thesis implies that capitalism stabilizes real wages while reducing wage growth relative to the value creation of the economy, leading to a self-induced collapse of capitalism (cf. Geuss 2004). We thus see a decline in living standards of the waged population relative to the unwaged,

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[10] We may want to debate whether a genealogical form of critique, as discussed in more detail below, is a *sui generis* form of critique and could thus be an addition to Jaeggi's framework. Especially the genealogical ideology-critique, as it has been advocated by Horkheimer and Adorno (cf. Abromeit 2016).

capital-owning population. In other words: the power of capital thereby increases, as the power of waged labor decreases. "In proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse", says Marx (1990: 799). Real wages stagnate proportionately to the increase in productivity, increasing the 'rate' of exploitation. In absolute terms, this implies (the empirically dubious claim) that a decline in living standards for the waged population as wages tend down to the absolute subsistence minimum.

Capitalism's proclivity towards immiseration makes capitalism problematic and worthy of critique. When we understand the immiseration thesis teleologically, the immiseration thesis predicts the collapse of capitalism as capitalism abrades its own pedestal: the life and livelihood of the workforce. This very movement of exposing the self-destructive nature of capitalism within the functional critique makes this functional critique immanent: capitalism cannot live up to its own standards, norm and practice are in conflict.

Capitalism is highly adaptive, Fraser and Jaeggi agree, yet their proposed form of critique appears rather static. So how can the functional critique of capitalism on economic grounds be anything but a historically situated snapshot? How can this critique take into account the totality of capitalism (a desideratum for a Critical Theory, as Fraser and Jaeggi are keen to emphasize repeatedly)? How can a functional critique be a critique of capitalism *as such*, and not just some teleologised critique of capitalism *as it plays out* in this or that historical moment? If the (ostensibly) inevitable crisis is the anchor of critique without which the functional critique lacks its normative force and direction, then the fact that capitalism can potentially adapt and possibly escape this perceived crisis deprives the functional critique of its normative force.

Moving away from the shortcomings of functional critique, there are several arguments Jaeggi puts forward in its favor: chiefly, the functional critique has no demand for externally situated first premises, i.e., no external standards of critique which would themselves require justification; the standards of critique are already innate to the object of critique. Capitalism is thus manifestly malfunctioning *on its own terms.*

The argument from capitalism undermining its own foundation urges us to make certain teleological assumptions about capitalism.[11] From the fact that a capitalist economy is premised on the existence and access to (sufficient) natural resources we may *not* take for granted that capitalism will necessarily undermine its own livelihood by destroying those natural resources. The looming crisis of capitalism is something we infer from some heavily teleologised first premises and the empirically untenable idea that capitalism will *not*, by itself, undergo any adaptive processes in order to avoid its own self-induced deterioration. The question is whether the adaptive powers of capitalism will always be greater than the magnitude of its crisis.[12]

The validity of the argument of capitalism undermining the livelihoods of our grandchildren is furthermore premised on the

[11] In her recent work on moral and social progress, Jaeggi (2018) is explicitly attempting to steer away from unfounded teleologising. The concept of progress she advocates is non-teleological, pragmatic-materialist and pluralistic (i.e. anti-ethnocentric). It is surprising therefore that her concept of critique, however, remains dressed in teleological assumptions.

[12] Accelerationists (cf. Rosa, 2015) fall into a similar trap. They seem to agree that, come long, the problem with capitalism will solve itself. They too thus overlook that capitalism itself can undergo processes of adaption in order to avoid its own deterioration. The idea of accelerating the propagation of the current ills is predicated on the erroneous idea of a fixed, unchanging, and unchangeable present.

normatively tainted presumption that an economic system is (morally) required to secure those livelihoods. But is it? What if we take 'the devil takes the hindmost' as our moral guiding principle? If economic systems are indeed required to secure the livelihoods of future generations, then there are norms and values which are predetermined – i.e., first premises – and applied to normatively assess economic systems.

The critique of capitalism's proclivity towards the pauperization of future generations is thus no longer a functional critique alone, it is a moral one. There is poverty and wealth in a capitalist society, and it is the distribution which is crooked. But bemoaning the injustice of maldistribution is no longer a (purely) functionalist issue, it is a moral issue. In light of this push towards moral assessment, Fraser and Jaeggi propose a "turn directly to the normative questions involved" (*ibid.*, 120). Call this 'the normative turn'.

V

The critique of capitalism after the normative turn

The maldistribution of wealth in a society calls for a justice-oriented critique: capitalism is unjust, it produces and reproduces an unjust society and thus morally harms people. The most prominent moral critique of capitalism is perhaps the critique of exploitation (*ibid.*, 120-127). Simply put, capitalism exploits humans by refusing to return them the fruits of their own labor. This is morally indefensible. Capitalism is unjust.

Other than the functional critique, this moral form of critique cannot do without some external first premises. Here is why: as discussed above, Nancy Fraser is keen to look behind the front-story of exploitation where she finds the hidden abode of

expropriation. For our purposes, we must ask where does the normative valence of a critique of exploitation and expropriation come from? One possible approach, as I have already mentioned, is to resort to a first premise saying that exploitation and expropriation are a denial of freedom, that a denial of freedom is morally wrong, and that this wrongness needs no further justification.

When the functional critique demands a moral critique, but the moral critique cannot do without some external first premises, then the one selling point of the functional critique – its alleged normative independence – has thereby been undercut. By means of an immanent critique we may thus criticize the normative turn for undercutting itself. Fraser and Jaeggi's idea is to turn directly to the normative questions involved in order to elevate functional critique from its anemic status thus seems to have run directly against its own ambitions.

Marx's critique of capitalism, as he makes clear in the Gotha Program, is not that capitalism robs the worker of the surplus of her labour, it is not simply unjust. There is nothing morally wrong with capitalism when viewed from *inside* a system which is based on contractual agreement and compensation, as Jaeggi puts it (ibid.: 124). There is no injustice, in the narrow sense of what constitutes an injustice. Only when viewed from *outside* the system, with external parameters of justice imposed from the outside, as it were, can we see what's the flaw in capitalism. This is what we talk about, when we talk about the infamous 'empty ought' of moral critique (cf. Jaeggi, 2005b). Schematically put, the moral critique of capitalism is a critique of capitalism only in a secondary sense: x is morally wrong, x (also) appears in capitalism, hence, by transitivity, capitalism is morally wrong.

The x might be an exploitative practice. But to say that x is morally wrong, and that an economic system or form of life ought

not include *x* or indulge in *x-ing* is, once again, to move away from morality and towards foreign territory, the territory of ethics. Again, we observe how Fraser and Jaeggi's critique of capitalism demands for a 'quick fix', expanding the critique to a different domain altogether: from functional, to moral, to ethical. Their functional and moral critique of capitalism has found itself in an argumentative cul-de-sac.

VI

Ethical critique

An ethical critique of capitalism (*ibid.*, 127-130) claims that capitalism destroys essential parts of what constitutes the good life. It conceives of capitalism as a world-self relation. It interrogates how capitalism structures our relations to ourselves, to the world, and the objects around us. The upshot: capitalism arguably contributes to the qualitative impoverishment of those life-circumstances.

Frazer and Jaeggi hold that Marx's critique of alienation in his early writings makes for an apt example of the ethical critique of capitalism (*ibid.*, 134; Jaeggi 2014, 342). It is the spiritlessness of mercantile interests, of a world that is limited to utilitarian values, they argue, that already withholds from us the prospects of living the good life. What we take to be marketable, interchangeable objects largely determines how we conceive of those objects, us, and our relations to those objects.

Again, we can ask if the ethical critique gets to the core of what is problematic with capitalism. Is capitalism uniquely responsible for the fact that many of us live indecent lives? Couldn't it be that much of what makes us miserable is related to what we could call the conditions of modernity, something that has nothing to do

with capitalism itself? Could we even possibly distinguish an ethical critique of modernity from an ethical critique of capitalism? Under scrutiny I contend the ethical critique is as aimless as the moral form of critique.

Unlike at previous argumentative obstacles, however, Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi do not offer yet another quick 'fix.' What they do instead is to reaffirm the entanglement of all three strands of critique (*ibid.*, 137). As disclosed above, it might be possible to overcome some of the weaknesses of each respective form of critique by referring (or migrating) the problem to yet another form of critique. The shortcomings of the functional critique took us towards a moral critique. The shortcomings of the moral critique took us towards an ethical critique. And indeed, it may be possible to overcome some disorientation of the ethical form of critique by referring back to the functional critique which, if all else fails, puts forth at least some very unique functional flaws of the capitalist form of life.

So much for my exposition of Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi's immanent critique of capitalism which takes elements from functional, ethical, and moral critique. The method of immanent critique has certainly established itself as a powerful tool. But is it powerful enough to transform the societal immoral, unethical, and functionally defective *status quo* it denounces? The capitalist form of life fails in a myriad of ways: it fails economically, socially, and culturally. Nancy Fraser's and Rahel Jaeggi's critique of capitalism, however, fails transformatively, as I shall argue below. This relates back to the Hegelian underbelly discussed above.

VII

Transformative failure

We can think of the normative aspirations of the practice of critique in two ways: (1) as a striving towards the transformation of the object of critique (which could be a reactionary, conservative, or emancipatory desire), or (2) as indifferent with respect to its actual effects on the object of critique.

While there is nothing that speaks against (2) from the point of view of an intellectual practice, it would make the practice of critique "a piece of dead scholarship, a matter of complete indifference to us living minds and active, living human beings", to once again repeat a line from Adorno (2001, 6). Not to aim at the transformation of the object of critique seems normatively unambitious.

It is elsewhere that Jaeggi (working paper) discusses the relation between (1) and (2) in more detail: critique, for Jaeggi, is a non-affirmative, non-authoritarian transformative practice—a critique which must not pretend to know-it-all, but in any case, work as a catalyst for the transformation of existing conditions. Critique is not (merely) the exercise of the rational faculties with the desire to bring about change, but a way of conduct, a practical endeavour itself, a form of life. I will return to this thread below.

In what sense, then, (if any), is Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi's critique of capitalism transforming capitalism? If their critique of capitalism claims to have transformative import, as the fourth chapter of *Capitalism* entitled 'Contesting Capitalism' suggests, then I wish to argue that it fails to live up to its own standards.

An immanent critique of Rahel Jaeggi's and Nancy Fraser's immanent critique of capitalism is in order.

We can establish an immanent critique precisely because Jaeggi and Fraser's immanent critique's ambitions to transform the object of critique that is capitalism – the norms it sets forth for itself, so to say – don't accord with the enactment of those norms. This is not a coincidence, as I hope to have argued dissolutely above, but the systematic failure of any free-floating, materially ungrounded critique.

With the ambition to resuscitate the Critical Theory tradition comes a hereditary baggage of which both Fraser and Jaeggi are well aware. Rethinking alienation without the Hegelian essentialisms, for instance, was one of Rahel Jaeggi's earlier and thoroughly convincing projects (2005a). Getting rid of other aspects of Hegel's spiritual omnipresence in contemporary Critical Theory could thus be a viable step towards the emancipation of Critical Theory from itself. I am thus surprised that neither Nancy Fraser nor Rahel Jaeggi addresses the left-Hegelian underbelly of their model of critique, especially with respect to what above I have called the Hegelian pitfall: only when the reason realizes itself in history will the world transform itself. Critique, at least when Hegel thinks of it as transformative, is neither the external bystander which oversees crises unfold in reality, nor is it a mere afterthought of those transformative events. Otherwise, judged by Critical Theory's own standards, the processes of transformation remains oddly disoriented in normative space.

It is this unity which needs to be addressed. How can we inaugurate thinking of critique as in unity with social practices? Critique being in unity with present social practices of the current situation might require more than taking its orientation from the inherent crises of the current situation, as Frazer and Jeaggi suggest. Since Frazer and Jeaggi make no effort explaining how/that/why, with regards to the theory-practice relation they break with the Hegelian heritage of Critical Theory, I take their

critique of capitalism to fail transformatively. We need ways of re-conceptualizing this unity, both in order to stay true to the Hegelian legacy of Critical Theory, and the prospects of surpassing it. Re-conceptualising the theory-practice relation, and therefore the question of what it means for theory to have transformative power, is what I will now turn to. In doing that, we have to pay attention to the fact that not only the contingency of social movements but also the nature of those movements can be problematized. The intimate theory-practice relation of Critical Theory is prone to 'abuse.' There may be social movements in the present, but how can Critical Theory decide which social movements are genuinely progressive, worth assuming unity with? The thought is, even if there are social movements with which to form a unity, we don't know how to identify the *right* social movements. If you listen to white supremacists, they also have a victim narrative. How do we know which are the good ones? A prefigurative approach to social activism can provide an answer.

VIII

Prefigurativism

For Richard Rorty (1993, 277), "the best way to expose or demystify an existing practice would seem to be by suggesting an alternative practice, rather than criticizing the current one". In other words, proposing an alternative social practice is better than merely pointing at the flaws of the *status quo*. But still better than proposing an alternative social practice is living and embodying this alternative social practice. So why don't we put the cart before the horse and try to think about the theory-practice and the critique-transformation relation by commencing at the transformative and moving towards a critique, or from practice

towards a theory? Why don't we turn Hegel on his head – once again?

I now wish to briefly sketch an alternative framework of a critique of capitalism and its potential for social transformation which I think is, first, sufficiently in line with the Critical Theory tradition, which is, second, not in conflict with any of Jaeggi and Fraser's 'expansions' of the domain of Critical Theory to Feminist theory, etc., and third, able to overcome the Hegelian pitfall. What is more, it argue can guide us towards 'the good' social practices, and single out those that are regressive. This approach takes its cue from the late Mark Fisher (2009, 80-81).

> The long, dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest even can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.

In recent years we have seen movements like 21st Century Socialism, the Movement of Squares, and Occupy.[13] What they have in common, according to Paul Raekstad (2018, 358), is their "commitment to a radical conception of democracy, human emancipation, and what is sometimes called 'prefigurative

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[13] Some argue these are attempts to combine radical-democratic and (left-) populist practices. For a discussion, see Kim 2020.

politics"'. The core idea of prefigurativism[14] is that "the social nexus you inhabit (the social movement you are part of, for instance), not only determines vastly your attitude towards reality as it reveals itself today, but also your attitude towards how reality could tomorrow be different" (Kreutz 2020). Prefigurativism becomes the "deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now" (Raekstad & Gradin 2020, 10). Prefigurative Politics, or prefigurativism, is thus a way of engaging in social change activism that seeks to bring about this *other* world by means of "planting the seeds of the society of the future in the soil of today's" (*ibid.*, 3). The slogan of the Industrial Workers of the World (2014, 4) puts it nicely as "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old." Adding to the pedigree, Marx (1969, 5) might be interpreted as referring to a quasi-prefiguration in his second thesis on Feuerbach: "In practice, men must demonstrate the truth, i.e., the reality, power, worldliness of his thinking".[15]

As a form of activism, prefigurativism stresses the idea that the means match the ends. It highlights that social structures enacted in the here-and-now, in the small confines of our organisations, institutions and rituals, mirror the wider social structures we can expect to see after transforming those societies along the lines of one's own principles. From a hands-on perspective, prefigurative politics entails that if you desire an anti-hierarchical society you

[14] See, inter alia, Graeber 2009, 2013, Maeckelbergh 2012, Yates 2015. Bloch's 'Concrete Utopia' and Wright's 'Lifestyle Politics' may also be considered instances of prefigurative thought.

[15] There is an interesting discussion to be had about whether Marx and Engels rejection of the idea that societal change can come about through moral argument and demonstration projects – of founding isolated phalanstères – in the Communist Manifesto applies also applies to prefigurative action (cf. Lovell 1992).

first have to build a non-hierarchical movement yourself. If that worked out well, you then expand the movement outwards, step by step, transforming society along your ideals (egalitarian or otherwise). Prefigurativism is thus, as the Average White Band funk classic says, about 'picking up the pieces' yourself.

What is the relation between prefigurativism and social critique? According to prefigurativists, activism itself fosters a better understanding of how power relations and social structures work, and how stubborn they are. Prefigurativists thus start with the practice and from there, based on an (arguably epistemically privileged) insight into the flaws of the *status quo*, begin to formulate a theory or critique.

IX

Objections to Prefigurativism

One might object to the idea of prefigurativism in a number of ways. Here are some possible objections of relevance to the project of overcoming the Hegelian pitfall and reviving a critique of capitalism in the spirit of Critical Theory.

(1) Since there is neither theory nor critique prior to the political practice of prefigurativism, the political practice must remain, at least in its first instance, without a clear normative direction.

(2) Where did prefigurative politics' 'radically alternative' practices come from if not from a critique of the *status quo*? In what sense can social practice ever be prior to social theory? In other words, in what sense can action ever be prior to thought?

(3) From an anti-capitalist perspective, is the idea of finding niches and cracks within the capitalist system and building alternative subcommunities within it anything but a form of

escapism? Is 'opting-out' a credible anti-capitalist strategy or the mere manifestation of hedonism?

(4) There are multiple social struggles and a plurality of social conflicts, misery, and suffering, but not all of those experiences of injustice and suffering give rise to a corresponding social movement, or in any case movements that could be considered *progressive*.[16] Again, we are approaching the Hegelian pitfall: what happens to the transformative potential of progressive theory in the absence of emancipatory interest?

(5) A failure to address latent crises (see point three above) "leads to ideology and other impediments to social learning–that is, to specific forms of irrationality", writes Jaeggi (working paper), tapping into Critical Theory's tradition of ideology-critique. Before long, flawed norms "have sedimented into social institutions" Jaeggi (2009: 274, my translation). How can ideological obfuscation be overcome?

X

Objections addressed

This fifth point can be straightforwardly addressed by reviving Critical Theory's exercises in ideology-critique. As Adorno remarked, we must make it "possible for us to break open this total matrix of delusion (*totaler Verblendungszusammenhang*), within which we are positioned" (2012, 155; my translation)*,* referring to the overcoming of ideological obfuscations by means of ideology-

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[16] For a brief discussion about prefigurativism and its potentially progressive, reactionary or conservative 'host-ideologies', see Kreutz 2020.

critique. Solutions to the other problems will fall into place once a robust notion of ideology-critique has been (re-)established.

A successful (and eventually transformative) critique of capitalism will have to proceed with a (genealogical) critique of (instances of) capitalist-ideology. Prefigurative politics is thus by no means a way of opting-out of capitalism. It is tearing holes into the fabric of capitalism, epistemic holes perhaps, in order to erode it from within, which answers the second and third problem.

Ideology-critique can work as the catalyst of epistemic liberation. Miranda Fricker (2009) has coined the concept of hermeneutic injustice which describes a situation in which an injustice is *phenomenologically* apparent but cannot *rationally* be processed because of a lack of hermeneutical resources. Sometimes there is a lack of terminology for the perception of those injustices, usually because those who experience injustice already have a disadvantage in getting their voices heard in public deliberation. This makes it a case of hermeneutical injustice. There is not only a manifest injustice in the first place, but also the higher-order injustice of not having the necessary hermeneutical resources to communicate about the perception of injustice. This addresses the fourth problem: it is true, not all experiences of injustice and suffering give rise to a corresponding social movement. The hermeneutical shadows that conceal injustices may be a contributing factor to injustices not being followed by an emancipatory movement. Ideology-critique can potentially solve this problem, too.

Finally, there is the problem of directionlessness: because there is no theory or critique prior to political practice, the prefigurative political practice must remain, at least in its first instance, without a predefined and unchangeable normative direction. Would a clear normative direction be at all desirable? Is a technocratic (or rather epistocratic) idea of a vanguard-lead social transformation

preferable over "inherently experimental and experiential" social practices (cf. Sande 2015, 189)? For most of its advocates, prefigurative politics is the "hypothetical formulation of alternatives and their continuous reformulation through 'trial and error'" (*ibid.*). We can consider this 'radical openness' of prefigurative politics an acknowledgement of the perpetual flux to which normative action too must be subjected, for otherwise one's normative desires are likely to develop into one's most stubborn dogmatism.

This is how we turn the Hegelian underbelly, the difficult theory-practice relation of Critical Theory, on its head: we start with the practice and the theory will follow. This is a grassroots anti-establishment approach to theory, one that I think is truthful to theory's frail potential to change the world.

One could object that the prefigurative approach to theory outlined above is subject to same Hegelian pitfall: where there's no practice, there's no theory. To some extent, that's true, but contrary to the all-time negative vibes at the Frankfurt School, the prefigurative approach doesn't bemoan those circumstances. High-flying thoughts won't topple the statues of dictators. It's window dressing to expect theory to have this transformative potential to begin with. Theory, in its high-flying, vindicatory forms, becomes relevant only once prefigurative action has torn those holes into the fabric of the (capitalist) *status quo*. On those grounds, prefigurativists and Hegel agree.

I now want to suggest that there is a place for pre-practice intellectual activity, namely in the form of ideology-critique. Yet I don't want to suggest that ideology-critique has the status of a full-fledged theory for that would undermine my claim that prefigurative grassroots action must proceed theory. On the contrary, ideology-critique is an activity which tears holes into the epistemic fabric of the *status quo* and thus possibly opens up the

floor to the grassroots anti-establishment approach to theory that I have outlined here. It might here suffice to say to ideology-critique has varying significance depending on the reasons we indulge in it: in order to support direct-action, or otherwise to have higher thoughts on the highs and lows of the art industry, as it's the Adornoian approach.

For what comes next, I think about my proposal as a form of pre-political pre-theory. I describe an epistemic practice which I think itself, albeit ostensibly part of the intellectual superstructure, floats free from the material base, as it were. Crudely, that's because epistemic notions are generally assumed to be more stable, less variant and dependent on the historical circumstance, and thus less prone to the Hegelian pitfall. I take this to move my proposal for a critical theory towards a middle-ground between some prefigurativist's total theory-as-activism view and the high-flying universalism of moralistic, liberal political philosophy.[17]

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[17] One of the reviewers for this journal was concerned that if prefigurative politics does not start with any normative self-understanding then how can it exactly prefigure the practices of a desirable future society (would one not need to have some sense of what is desirable first, and of what is thus undesirable about the present society)? How does 'trial and error' work if one has no standards of what an error is and when a trial was more or less successful? To that I want to add the following clarification: I agree, it is an open question to what extent prefigurative politics can work without normative standards and ideas of what is desirable. The idea seems to be that the standards of error and success evolve from the practice itself, much like a learning process. They are not pre-defined. In that sense, prefiguration works without those normative standards but soon develops them. In any case this concerns only the prescriptive part of the project. The norms to which the pre-practice part of the proposal refer are purely epistemic, and we don't need to discuss epistemic norms in the same way we have to discuss ethical norms as contingent on history and power.

XI
Prefigurativism and Genealogical Ideology-Critique

There has been a recent resurgence of genealogical critique in anglophone political theory, in the form of ideology-critique and otherwise (cf. Srinivasan 2015; Stanley 2015; Celikates, Haslanger, Stanley, forthcoming). Srinivasan (2015, 326) writes that "the 'two cultures' of the modern intellectual world are no longer […] the humanities and the sciences, but rather the culture of those on the one hand who think that everything must be genealogised, and on the other, those who think that there is nothing to be learned from genealogy." There's also an armada of political realists advocating a non-status quo biased form of realism which Enzo Rossi calls Radical Realism. These radical realists utilize genealogy as critique (cf. Brinn 2019; Cross 2019; Honig & Stears 2011; Prinz 2016; Raekstad 2016; Rossi 2019; Prinz & Rossi 2017, Rossi & Argenton 2020).

Genealogical ideology-critique seeks to detect and dismantle epistemic flaws and replace them with fully epistemically transparent beliefs. Some authors committed to political realism (cf. Rossi 2019; Rossi & Argenton 2020) take legitimation-stories (quasi-*epistemes*, in Foucault's terminology) as their target, which, via genealogy inquiry, can either be debunked or vindicated (cf. Craig 2007). A legitimation-story, a narrative which legitimizes a certain authority, is vindicated when its epistemic pedigree is traced and deemed flawless, reliable or truth-conductive.[18] In that case, we have good reason to accept this legitimation-story. If not, if it's epistemic credence can be debunked, then we have good reason to discard it and question the legitimacy of the authority in question.

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[18] The Hegelian teleological story of a conflict between norm and practice striving towards sublation, i.e., Hegel's teleological historicism, might be considered a vindicatory genealogy itself.

The case for vindication is relatively straightforward: empirical observations that are based on reliable sensory input, such as my belief that I am right now writing on a MacBook keyboard, are a good example for a vindicatory genealogy. I have antecedent reasons to think that the beliefs I base on those sensory inputs reliably track mind-independent reality. In the case of morality, metaphysics, and pretty much every *a prioriism* we generally lack those antecedent reasons from which we could infer that our *a priori* beliefs, or our beliefs about the making sense of legitimation stories, reliably track some mind-independent truth. That forms the basis for a debunking genealogy.

A legitimation-story is debunked when it is shown to have emerged in an epistemically dubious way, or "as a consequence of ignoble historical events" (*ibid.*). If that's the case, "it should be criticized if not straightforwardly abandoned" (*ibid.*).[19]

The idea is roughly that legitimation stories can have epistemic defects: they may be circular, they may be non-sequitur, they may commit a genetic fallacy or be committed to any other kind of epistemically dubious behavior (cf. Rossi 2008 for circularities in consent-based liberal-legitimacy). Those defects can be described as *epistemic* defects. Dismantling the epistemic overhang via the mechanisms of genealogy has the potential to reveal whether a given legitimation story *really* makes sense (whether it is epistemically flawless) or whether their making sense is merely the

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[19] Genealogical critique is not immanent, it is external. What makes it look internalist is the circularities in reasoning it is supposed to unveil. The normative standards are epistemic standards (i.e., don't have circular reasoning; if origin and object of a belief are the same, that's dubious, etc. there may be other standards of good epistemic practice), but they are external from what is their content. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on making this clearer.

product of some epistemic distortion. This is to say, genealogy is there to examine whether a given legitimation story is epistemically reliable, or not. Rossi (2019, 646) gets to the heart of it: "[C]ritique need not tell us that a given social structure is oppressive or unjust. It aims instead to tell us that the legitimation stories supporting that structure are epistemically suspicious and so should be discarded, or that the stories supporting other actual or hypothetical structures should be taken seriously."

In Rossi & Argenton (2019) we learn about a legitimation story for the (liberal) state which seeks to derive legitimacy from the fact that the (liberal) state protects private property. This legitimation story can be debunked by looking – as is the method of genealogy – at historical, anthropological, and archeological evidence (cf. Foucault 1990). These indicate that the concept of private property (and I suspect citizenship, the nation-state, money, and many others, too) is both the *product* of the (liberal capitalist) state and at the same time *employed*, in a functional sense, in its legitimation-stories – a classic case of circularity.[20] If this is a correct genealogical assessment, a legitimation story for the 'manufacturer' of private property, the (liberal) state which derives its normative valence from the concept of private property, is defective. Genealogy as critique thus plays a problematizing role, "offering a stimulus to critical examine the concepts [usually taken] for granted" (Prinz & Raekstand 2020, 6).

The prefigurative critical theorist I suggest can employ ideology-critique to tear those holes into the epistemic fabric of capitalist-ideology in which prefigurative activism can then take

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[20] This goes back to Bernard Williams, who introduced this as his Critical Theory Principle (CTP): "The acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance has been produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified" (2005, 6).

place, and on the basis of which a vindicatory, prescriptive, no longer purely negative Critical Theory may flourish.[21] From the perspective from *within* the object of critique, prefigurative critical theorists can formulate a social and political theory without fearing the Hegelian pitfall. Critical Theory is no longer on the receiving end, waiting for emancipatory projects to come around, but is actively involved, through the practice of ideology-critique, in making possible those emancipatory projects. This practice, however, is pre-political and in a sense pre-theoretical. It is pre-political since it concerns our epistemic practices, and it is pre-theoretical because it shuns normative prescription. This makes Critical Theory neither (or both) a purely Nietzschean project, which takes theory to be *unzeitgemäß* (out of synch with the present), essentially looking towards the future, *nor* Hegelian, which takes theory to be "time grasped in a concept", something that is essentially retrospective (cf. Geuss 2014).

For Srinivasan, referring to Geuss's *Idea of a Critical Theory* (1981), genealogical critique has been a part of immanent critique all along (cf. Honneth 2000). She says, "for the Frankfurt School theorists, for example, ideology critique […] which might be thought of as a kind of critical genealogy […] has a dual epistemic and practical character: emancipating us from the grip of bourgeois ideology precisely by revealing to us its deficient epistemic status" (2019, 140). As I have argued above, Critical Theory, when done the right way, is as much addressee of the social reality as it is a form of social practice itself.

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[21] This is not to say that a debunking genealogy is the necessary first step to make possible prefigurative practice; there may be lacunas for prefiguration for a whole host of other reasons.

Conclusion

Max Horkheimer's (1993, 9) original project of Critical Theory as a social philosophy began with "the idea of a continuous, dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and specialized scientific praxis." A prefigurative politics made possible by genealogical disruptions in the epistemic fabric of the (capitalist) *status quo* may thus be the catalyst of Critical Theory's own emancipation. It's the approach that aims to provide 'self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age'. This concludes my (admittedly sketchy) attempt to overhaul Critical Theory by guiding it both away from and back to the center of Hegelian thought.

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