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ARTICLE

A Critic on the Other Side of the Rhine? On the Appropriations of Foucault's Political Thought by the Heirs of the Frankfurt School

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ABSTRACT. In this article, I make the case that the reception of Foucault's politicpal thought by different authors linked to the Frankfurt School tradition (J. Habermas, N. Fraser, A. Honneth, A. Allen and M. Saar) allows us to discern a series of transformations within the tradition itself. In general terms, it is argued that the fundamental change concerns the gradual abandonment of the problem of social rationalization in favor of a perspective focused on the question of processes of subjectivation, a change that calls into question the very meaning of the tradition.

Keywords: Foucault, Frankfurt School, power, rationalization, subjectivation

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s, it has become common within the Frankfurt School tradition to refer to Foucault's work, either to criticize it or to appropriate it. Notably, during the 1980s, Foucault faced substantial criticism from Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser due to what they perceived as the "normative confusions" of genealogical critique, leading them to draw a strict line of separation between their perspective and Foucault's. Axel Honneth marked the beginning of a change in this relationship. In *Critique of Power*, Honneth placed Foucault within the tradition of critical theory, presenting his work as one of the "reflective stages" of its development.[1] According to Honneth, despite still carrying confusions, problems, and deficits, Foucault's work represented a significant contribution toward constructing a suitable critical social theory. More recently, following Honneth's lead, authors like Amy Allen and Martin Saar sought to appropriate Foucault's work to address problems that, in their view, the tradition's

[1] Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* (1991).

theoretical framework was incapable of resolving.[2] In my interpretation, this appropriation is linked to a paradigm shift within the Frankfurt School tradition, largely moving away from the classical Weberian problem of the paradoxes of social rationalization, which underlies the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and focusing on the issue of subjectivation processes and their entanglement with power relations, a problem typically associated with Foucault.

In the following sections, I will proceed as follows. In the first section, after briefly revisiting the critiques leveled by Habermas and Fraser—critiques that fundamentally revolve around the status of the concept of power and its relationship with the normative commitments of genealogical critique—I will present Axel Honneth's initial approach to Foucault's work, explicitly situating him within the tradition of Critical Theory. Second, I will propose the hypothesis that the problem of "social rationalization" serves as the backdrop for the criticisms directed at Foucault by these authors, fundamentally guiding their interpretation. Before concluding, in the third section, I will revisit the early writings of Amy Allen and Martin Saar to highlight that, in their work, the issue of social rationalization gives way to the problem of subjectivation processes, and this shift underpins the positive appropriation of Foucault's work. Thus, the appropriation of Foucault's work, particularly his considerations on "power," is incorporated within an implicit shift in the social critique paradigm, moving away from the aporias of the social rationalization process to focus on the relationships between the formation of subjectivities and power relations.

FOUCAULT'S GENEALOGY OF POWER AS A 'REFLECTIVE STAGE' OF A CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

The question of the affinity between Michel Foucault's work and the tradition of German Critical Theory has been a persistent issue for nearly 40 years. This affinity has been a subject of ongoing discussion and has been frequently highlighted by commentators, at least since Duccio Trombadori directly posed the question to Foucault himself in his 1978 interview. When asked about his position in relation to the Frankfurt School, Foucault explained how, upon reading Rusche and Kirchheimer's book, *Punishment and Social Structure*, he recognized the proximity between their works in their shared concern with "the effects of power in their relation to a rationality that has historically and geographically defined itself in the West since the 16th century".[3] The convergence noted by Foucault lay in the attempt to investigate the processes of rationalization that shaped Western societies, taking into account their negative consequences. In other words, it involved questioning the promises of the Enlightenment and

[2] The main works of Amy Allen are *The Politics of Ourselves* (2008) and *The End of Progress* (2016), while Martin Saar's notable contribution is *Genealogie als Kritik* (2007). In this article, however, I ultimately privilege earlier or minor texts to comprehend how they established the theoretical framework that underpins those works. It is noteworthy to mention Colin Koopman's work, *Genealogy as Critique* (2013), as it develops a similar program, which, in my view, may be even more consistent in various respects. Nevertheless, Koopman lacks institutional affiliation with the Frankfurt School's Institute of Social Research or a commitment to the legacy of the Frankfurt School tradition. Therefore, for the purposes of this work, I prioritize the works of Allen and Saar.

[3] Michel Foucault, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault" [1980], in *Dits et Écrits IV*, ed. Daniel Defert, François Ewald and Jacques Lagrange (1994), 73.

the possibility of these promises turning into instruments of domination. "A fundamental problem we are all still grappling with".[4]

As Foucault began to explore this proximity to the Frankfurt School more frequently in interviews and lectures,[5] Jürgen Habermas, the foremost representative of that tradition at the time, vehemently distanced himself from what he perceived as a radical anti-modern vanguard. This vanguard, as he saw it, aimed to undermine the foundations of Western rationalism, which was viewed as oppressive, through the radical denial of reason and the celebration of transgressive experiences.[6] The accusation of lacking a moral foundation that could legitimize political struggle was undoubtedly the most emphasized aspect. Nancy Fraser echoed this criticism, which constituted the core of Habermas's objections. Questions such as "why is struggle preferable to submission? Why ought domination to be resisted?"[7] — all of which are essential to philosophy and politics — were seen as unanswered by genealogical critique. As an external and totalizing critique of modern society that refused to offer alternatives, it was considered ambiguous and incapable of rational legitimacy.[8]

The accusation that genealogical critique lacks a normative foundation is closely linked to a particular interpretation of what is often called Foucault's "theory of power." This "theory" (a term Foucault often rejected) posed a significant problem for Habermas, particularly due

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[4] Ibid.

[5] In a series of texts which date from the late 1970s and early 1980s, Foucault explores his relationship with those authors identified with the Frankfurt School. See, in particular, "Entretien avec Michel Foucault" (286), "Omnes et singulatim: vers une critique de la raison politique" (134), "Le sujet et le pouvoir" (222), "Structuralisme et post-structuralisme" (431), "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières ?" (679), "Foucault" (631), all of them in *Dits et Écrits IV* (1994). In addition, *Qu'est-ce que la critique ? : Suivi de La culture de Soi* (2015), "note 5" on page 99.

[6] Habermas, Jürgen, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," *New German Critique* 22 (1981), 13.

[7] Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (1989), 29.

[8] There has been no shortage of attempts to defend Foucault from these accusations since he did not do so himself. The main argument directed against Habermas is that Foucault's works would be fully justified by a commitment to freedom. For example, Jana Sawicki (2014) draws attention to two dimensions of the concept of freedom in Foucault. According to her, this concept points to two "capacities." First, "the capacity for critical reflection on who we are in the present," and second, "the capacity to transform power relations through ethical practices of freedom" (158). This dual conception of freedom is linked to the recognition of both the possibility of reflexively distancing oneself from the way one currently acts, that is, the recognition of the "non-necessity of present modes of thought" (Ibid.), and the possibility of resistance by individuals against forms of domination. In these terms, one can say that freedom is understood by Foucault as a dual capacity for resistance: on the one hand, resistance against customary forms of thought, and on the other hand, resistance against current forms of domination. Thus, all of Foucault's work would be dedicated to the task of doing justice to this conception of freedom, which would serve as a normative principle. Against this position, however, in Habermasian terms, Matthew King (2009) argues that a mere commitment to freedom would not be sufficient as a basis for grounding criticism since, for Habermas, it constitutes a simple "ethical" imperative, not a "moral" one (290-297). In these terms, even if Foucault were to have a commitment to freedom as an ethical value from which he could construct a chain of subjective preferences, he would not be able to explain why someone should necessarily prefer freedom over another value. In other words, Foucault may ethically justify his moral judgments based on the principle of freedom, but he does not explain what would make adherence to this principle a necessity or what would compel someone to want to be free. Foucault could not explain why freedom would be a more important value than others. In other words, why should someone prefer freedom over non-freedom? However, the Foucauldian response seems to be that such a preference does not need to be grounded.

to its totalizing appearance. According to this theory, Foucault reduced the history of the West to a succession of cycles of domination and rejected modernity as a generalized power structure in which modern science was seen as a mere instrument of power. This reduction was possible because Foucault's investigations were based on a paradoxical concept of "power" that traced its origins to a naturalized version of Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power," which was taken as a kind of objective structuring synthesis of the social world and an explanatory principle for historical facts. In Habermas's terms, Foucault allowed himself "an absolutely asocial concept of the social," understood as the "practice" of power, i.e., as "violent and asymmetrical influence on the freedom of movement of other participants in interaction".[9] If the "social" is simply the result of the exercise of power, why should anyone engage in political struggles or make moral judgments about social relations? Thus, the conclusion was that Foucault not only failed to escape the dilemmas of the "philosophy of the subject" but also fell victim to a "performative contradiction" in light of his political engagement and explicit commitment to freedom, which contradicted his own conception of the "social."[10]

The concept of "power" posed problems not only for Habermas but also for Nancy Fraser, who argued that Foucault adopts a concept of power that does not allow him to condemn any objectionable features of modern societies, while his rhetoric belies the conviction that these societies are completely devoid of redeeming features".[11] The "theory of power" presumed by genealogical critique prevented it from being regarded as genuine "critique" because it preemptively ruled out the possibility of free interaction between individuals and thus failed to distinguish between relations of domination and relations of freedom. Like Habermas, Axel Honneth also identified significant issues with Foucault's "theory of power." While attempting to extract the concept of "action" underlying Foucault's "social philosophy," Honneth argued that Foucault first conceived i) the "social" based on the model of strategic struggle among actors (similar to Hobbes); secondly, ii) "society" as the stabilized aggregate result of social struggle that engenders a "power regime" (understood as "society"); and thirdly, iii) the "history of modern society" as a process of increasing anonymous forms of social domination through increasingly sophisticated microphysical mechanisms.[12] Despite pointing out these issues, Honneth not only became sympathetic to Foucault's work, as opposed to Habermas, but also highlighted how Foucault addressed the structuring of socially mediated symbolic interaction by power relations, which represented a theoretical advancement over Habermas's dualistic perspective based on the opposition between the lifeworld and system, as presented in the *Theory of Communicative Action.*[13]

In *Critique of Power*,[14] Honneth described Foucault's "theory of power" as a "social theory" based on a concept of the "social" reduced to strategic conflict, similar to Hobbes's social

[9] Jürgen Habermas, *O discurso filosófico da modernidade* (2000), 340.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, 33.
[12] Honneth, *Critique of Power*, 176-201.
[13] Jürgen Habermas, *Teoría de la acción comunicativa I: racionalidad de la acción y racionalización social* [1981], 2003.
[14] Honneth has engaged with Foucault's oeuvre in other places (1995). In any case, besides the somewhat dated status of his discussions on Foucault, I consider *Critique of Power* to be a privileged work not only because it presents his most detailed reading of the French philosopher but, above all, because it constitutes

theory. In this "reinterpretation," works such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will to Knowledge* appeared as a general interpretation of the history of Western culture in which Foucault had taken his ambition to realize a "history guided by a theory of power" to its logical conclusion.[15] According to Honneth, *Discipline and Punish* could be read as a negative dissolution of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* presented in terms of "systems theory." In this work, Foucault showed how social systems "functionalized" themselves to pursue more power. This functionalization led to the loss of individual freedom and the annihilation of subjectivity as human actions were transformed into mechanical movements performed by "docile bodies." Since this "theory of power" was based on a one-sided view of what constituted "social action," reduced to "strategic action," it ultimately conceived individuals as mere automatons. Thus, Foucault's "social theory," like the one underlying the works of Adorno and Horkheimer, according to Honneth, failed to provide an adequate theoretical framework for thinking about the broader process of social "integration" and "rationalization" because it could only see the expansion of domination within it. In other words, since genealogical critique reduced the "social" to a war for "power," its investigation could only lead to the expansion of domination. Foucault's problem, therefore, similar to that of Adorno and Horkheimer, was seen as stemming from starting with the wrong premise, i.e., from adopting an impoverished and deficient concept of the "social."

When conceiving the "social" as "strategic action conflict," Foucault, according to Honneth, leaves three questions open. Firstly, in his historical investigations, he could not distinguish between "social power over subjects" and "instrumental power over objects", because subjects are "objectified" by power.[16] Secondly, he does not make it clear whether "the cause that precedes the elementary situation of conflict is individual or collective interest that is inherently incompatible," as in Hobbes, or if "the mutual incompatibility of interests is given by certain historical conditions," as in Marx. According to Honneth, some of Foucault's comments suggest the former option, that is, "the assertion, reminiscent of Hobbes, of an original state of everyone against everyone".[17] Thirdly, for Honneth, reducing the "social" to strategic conflict makes moral norms function as mere "legitimizing superstructure" since they cannot play a significant role in the process of social integration, because Foucault denies the possibility of action motivated by a rationally established agreement.[18]

Thus, the major question for Foucault would be to explain "how a system of interconnected power positions, i.e., a system of domination, can emerge from a process of strategic conflict among actors".[19] How can a system of domination stabilize itself when there is nothing that

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a real program for critical social theory according to which critique needs to review its methodological, ontological and normative presuppositions in order to develop a new conception of the ways the sphere of the "social" is intertwined with "power" in order to realize his constitutive interest in freedom. This is the program that will be bequeathed not only to the heirs of the tradition who also seek to draw on Foucault's work, such as Allen and Saar, but also to authors like Robin Celikates (2018), Rahel Jaeggi (2018) and Titus Stahl (2022).

[15] *Critique of Power*, 178.

[16] Ibid., 151.

[17] Ibid., 157.

[18] Ibid., xxvi.

[19] Ibid.

provides coherence to the infinite web of individual actions? Foucault's fundamental goal, therefore, would be to "understand the formation and reproduction of complex power structures solely on the basis of a strategic model of action".[20] In this way, a "power system" would emerge as a process in which certain positions are temporarily consolidated by connecting as a "network" in a "centerless system".[21] Hence, a "power regime," for Foucault, "is nothing more than a momentary junction of similar outcomes of actions in different locations within a context of social life".[22] However, for Honneth, this model, which conceives the emergence of social order from local strategic relationships in everyday life (the core of the "microphysics of power," as he calls it), presents a serious problem: "if society is conceived exclusively as a nexus of strategic-type actions, how are the results of situational actions temporarily stabilized and then connected to a system of stabilized action outcomes elsewhere?".[23]

Explaining this "stabilization of the power regime" would be especially challenging for Foucault given his rejection of approaches that involve the idea of "ideology" or rely on simple coercion through the use of force. Moreover, as mentioned, "his model of action has no room for the existence of a normative agreement" that provides coherence to the "power regime".[24] By conceiving moral norms as a "mere legitimizing superstructure," Foucault cannot appeal to the dimension of recognition based on mutually agreed-upon norms.[25] Thus, the problem of the cessation, even if momentary, of the endless struggle of all against all, as posed by Talcott Parsons in his chapter on Hobbes in *The Structure of Social Action*, reappears in Foucault.[26]

Foucault's solution to this "Hobbesian problem" of stabilizing a social order prone to destabilization, according to Honneth, would be to assert that "a power order (...) can reduce its own instability through the use of increasingly technically effective means to preserve power".[27] Consequently, according to Honneth, genealogical critique would have the task of investigating how strategies for sophistication and intensification of domination develop. Foucault's thesis would be that, in modern societies, a new type of power has emerged that not only has a negative aspect, as in the case of violence and ideology, which by definition would cause individuals to give up their selfish goals, but also a productive aspect: biopower, which produces individual desires, yearnings, and needs, thus ensuring social cohesion.[28] Although Honneth considers Foucault's characterization of this positive aspect of power insufficient, he suggests that it could be understood as the "capacity to create rules of conduct".[29] However, even this concept of "norm" remains rather vague for him. Nevertheless, this concept should be associated with the category of the "body" to understand the issue of the "productivity of power." Foucault would have a "naturalistic conviction" that what should be

[20] *Critique of Power*, 158.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 160.
[24] Ibid., 162.
[25] Ibid., 160-161.
[26] Ibid., 163.
[27] Ibid., 164.
[28] Ibid., 164-165.
[29] Ibid., 166.

taken into account is not "cultural modes of thought" but rather "the bodily expression of life," which societies need to control for stability.[30] Therefore, the "capacity for social integration" is expressed in how society is "sufficiently capable of coordinating bodily behaviors".[31] Modern power techniques would not only coordinate bodily gestures but also systematically produce them.[32] Thus, "a wide range of practices" is taken by the modern form of power as "the motor and gestural movements of individuals forced into blind automatism (...) and trained for productive work".[33] This is what Foucault referred to as "discipline." The history of Europe's modernization is seen as this process of "disciplining the bodies," in an exclusively physical sense, and gradual improvement of techniques of bodily control.[34]

Scientific knowledge, therefore, would be linked to the "social" dimension of the struggle for power. Thus, by producing "norms" capable of being increasingly effectively internalized by individuals, it would be a mere useful instrument for the development of new and ever more refined techniques of domination. According to Honneth, for Foucault, "the requirements of a possible objectivity for scientific knowledge are determined by the goal of social subjugation of individuals. Outside of this strategic relationship, methodically produced knowledge serves no specific purpose".[35] Knowledge, for Foucault, "only contributes to the constant control of the social opponent".[36] This "connection between efforts to acquire theoretical knowledge and strategic action" would be one of those things that Foucault does in a very imprecise and superficial manner.[37] As if that were not enough, for Honneth, echoing Habermas, "the type of theory of knowledge proposed by Foucault as the basis for his critique of science would lead him to the contradiction of no longer being able to epistemologically justify his own academic research activity".[38]

In the end, Foucault's analyses of the emergence of "regimes of power" are marked by irreconcilable ambiguity. He is not capable of explaining the "social" solely as a field of strategic conflict of actions and is forced to resort to a functionalist systemic model guided by an imperative of intensifying domination.[39] "The coercive model of social order, in which the original concept of the social as a field of social struggle is transformed into the concept of a network of disciplinary social institutions," becomes increasingly sophisticated.[40]

It is this "reinterpretation" of Foucault's work in light of the problem of "social rationalization" and the related attempt to solve it through a reformulation of the concept of the "social" as a "field of social struggle" that allows Honneth to place him within the tradition of the Frankfurt School. In Foucault, according to Honneth, the process of "rationalization" that modern societies have undergone takes on its most radical and negative form since it is

[30] *Critique of Power*, 167
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 168.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 170.
[36] Ibid., 171.
[37] Ibid., 171-172.
[38] Ibid., 172.
[39] Ibid., 201.
[40] Ibid., 201, emphasis added.

understood as the progressive functionalization of society guided by an imperative of more domination. Far from being a "transcendence of the philosophy of the subject," Foucault's investigations reveal a commitment to a kind of Hobbesian philosophical anthropology. The will to subjugate the enemy would be the true nature of man, who seeks nothing else but the submission of those around him. Modern forms of knowledge play a fundamental role in this process, as they efficiently control the "bodies" of individuals through the creation of internalized "norms." Foucault's "theory of social rationalization" thus appears as the history of the process of domesticating individuals through physical and biological control of the body.

THE PROBLEM OF 'SOCIAL RATIONALIZATION' AS A PARADIGM FOR CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

Honneth's interpretation can be inserted into a kind of standard reading of Foucault's works, according to which they offer an image of the progressive assimilation of modern society by a domineering and insidious will to power that leaves little or no room for freedom.[41] Along these lines, accusations often revolve around the denial of freedom in favor of the rigidity of a "structure of knowledge" or a "regime of power" that, in the end, would be self-contradictory. Based on this "standard reading," for example, *Madness and Civilization* is typically presented as an exposition of the history of the suppression and condemnation of madness by reason, which, in the end, reveals "a romantic desire to see madness as an infrarational source of fundamental truth".[42] Similarly, *Discipline and Punish* is interpreted as an exposition of how an insidious form of power progressively came to structure modern society, "disciplining" individuals and ensnaring them in an ultra-sophisticated network of domination. The same pattern applies to the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, especially its final chapter, where the emergence of a new impersonal form of domination, which Foucault called "biopower" and whose object is biological life itself, is suggested.

Colin Koopman notes how "thinkers who usually see themselves as opposed to one another – for instance, Derrida and Habermas – found themselves aligned against Foucault on the very same points and by deploying the very same assumptions."[43] Against Foucault, it is usually claimed that there is room for the exercise of freedom, and contrary to what he asserted, total domination did not occur, either because irrationality cannot be excluded by reason, Derrida would say, or because, despite everything, reason did not transmute into complete irrationality, as Habermas would argue.[44] Habermas's interpretation, like that of Fraser and Honneth, fits perfectly into this pattern, and it is only from this perspective that their objections make sense. Koopman suggests that this "standard reading" tends to interpret Foucault schematically in light of Max Weber's "theory of social rationalization".[45] This suggestion is extremely interesting because it allows us to see the reasons that, in my view, lead

[41] Colin Koopman, "Revising Foucault: the history and critique of modernity," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36 (2010), 549.
[42] Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* (1989), 71.
[43] Koopman, "Revising Foucault", 549.
[44] "Revising Foucault", 550.
[45] "Revising Foucault", 547-550.

Habermas, Honneth, and Fraser to treat Foucault's works, especially *Madness and Civilization*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The Will to Knowledge*, in parallel with Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[46] For these authors, what is ultimately at stake for critical social theory seems to be precisely the correct way of reading that process of "rationalization" described by Weber. While Adorno, Horkheimer, and Foucault would emphasize the "negative" side of this process, as the development and expansion of forms of domination, Habermas, Fraser, and Honneth want to save its "positive" side as a process of expanding freedom. Weber's "theory of social evolution" thus functions as a kind of "lens," as a point of view from which these authors look not only at the tradition itself but also at "competing" theories, which they seek to overcome through a reformulation of the supposedly reductive theoretical assumptions of not only Adorno, Horkheimer, and Foucault but also Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Nietzsche, Hegel, Rousseau, and Hobbes—the "classics of social philosophy"[47]—in order to make room for a more complex conception of the "social."

In light of Weber's "theory of social evolution," modern societies would be characterized by a process of differentiation of "spheres of action". However, historically, Weber observes a kind of progressive expansion of the form of rationality characteristic of "rational action with respect to ends," the "strategic rationality," in Habermas's terminology, into other social spheres. "Modernization," therefore, would correspond, in Weber's terms, on the one hand, to the "differentiation" of reason within social spheres and, on the other hand, to the spread of strategic rationality to other social spheres, especially to the political sphere, i.e., its "rationalization." This means that political decisions in modern societies would increasingly be based not on a normative principle about what society should be but on rational calculation. The result is a kind of "freezing of politics," which is reduced to mere discussion about resource allocation. Thus, there is a peculiar inversion of ends and means, as rational calculation, when introduced into politics, ceases to be a means to achieve certain ends and becomes an end in itself. In other words, "efficiency" becomes a guiding principle for political decision-making itself rather than merely regulating the use of means to implement those decisions.

For Habermas, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be understood as the radicalization of this Weberian diagnosis. According to him, Adorno and Horkheimer had identified the introduction of the strategic form of rationality not only in the political sphere but in all aspects of social life. They "expand instrumental reason into a category of the global historical process of civilization as a whole, that is, they project the process of reification to a time before the emergence of capitalism in the early modernity to the true beginning of hominization".[48] In these terms, rationalization is understood as the process by which, in the Western world, instrumental reason, which structures science, is widely disseminated, becoming, on the one hand, increasingly refined and, on the other hand, expanding into all spheres of social life by replacing traditional values and emotions as the driving force of social action.

The entire effort of Habermas's work is to update the problem of "social rationalization" without reducing it to a process of domination, as Adorno and Horkheimer might have done.

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[46] Axel Honneth (1995) and Deborah Cook (2013) have noted the similarity between Foucault's work and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

[47] Martin Saar, "Power and critique," *Journal of Power* 3:1 (2010), 7.

[48] Habermas, *Teoría de la Acción Comunicativa I,* 466.

In *Technology and Science as Ideology*, he reformulates the Weberian concept of "rationalization" by attempting to break the link between reason and oppression, which is characteristic of Adorno and Horkheimer's work, in order to regain a positive sense of rationalization.[49] Habermas's reformulation aims, one might say, to save the notion of rationalization. To do so, he distinguishes between i) the "rationalization of symbolically mediated interactions," which is guided by intersubjectively defined social norms and carry with them "reciprocal expectations of behavior" due to the "internalization of social roles" for the purpose of "maintaining institutions," and ii) the "rationalization of rational action systems with respect to ends (instrumental actions and strategic actions)," which is governed by "technical rules" given independently of a linguistic context, defined by "prognoses and conditional imperatives," and acquired through "learning skills and qualifications" with the function of providing "problem solutions." While the rationalization of symbolically mediated interactions points to "emancipation" and "individuation" through the "expansion of communication free from domination," the rationalization of the system of rational action with respect to ends points to the "increase in productive forces" through the "expansion of technical disposability".[50] In general, social rationalization, for Habermas, concerns the increase in the capacity to rationally anchor conduct in various spheres of society. This means that in a rationalized "lifeworld," interactions are not determined by imposed norms but by communicatively mediated understanding.[51]

Habermas, therefore, performs a "reinterpretation of the reinterpretation" of the Weberian diagnosis made by Adorno and Horkheimer, emphasizing the need to recognize a form of rationality that can account for the conditions of possibility of the differentiation process of reason itself. This form will be defined by him as "communicative rationality." Unlike "strategic rationality," which aims at maximizing efficiency through calculation, "communicative rationality" has the goal of "mutual understanding" among the actors engaged in the communication process and, thus, underlies the process of social integration itself. Behind every social action, there is a "background consensus" that allows the actions of the involved actors to make sense. Thus, every action, even strategic action, even dispute, presupposes mutual understanding, an agreement, whose foundation is "communicative rationality," which, therefore, has primacy over other forms of rationality. It is this primacy of communicative rationality that allows Habermas to argue that in it lies the possibility of social emancipation, now redefined in terms of "communication free from coercion."

The introduction of communicative rationality allows Habermas to formulate a diagnosis of the process of social evolution distinct from that of Adorno and Horkheimer. In his view, these authors had a one-sided view of the history of modern societies since they reduced reason to its "instrumental" form. Therefore, all "social action" becomes "instrumental action." This process of evolution, for Habermas, has a dual character. First, it concerns the differentiation of spheres of value made possible by communicative rationality, and only secondarily, as a tendency in modern societies, the expansion of strategic rationality into other value

[49] Jürgen Habermas, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology" [1968], in *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics* (1971), 91-94.
[50] Habermas, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology," 91-92.
[51] Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Habermas and the Search for a Rational Society* (2004), 78.

spheres of action. Only this second dimension of social rationalization would have detrimental effects. The first dimension, on the other hand, carries the expansion of freedoms, and, in this sense, must be preserved. This diagnosis will lead to the reformulation of the critical theory of society anchored, now, in "communicative rationality." "Communicative action," understood as action oriented toward mutual understanding among participants in a coercion-free context, thus becomes the foundation, means, and end of social critique.

With this reformulation, the "theory of social rationalization" becomes central to how Habermas and, in his wake, Fraser and Honneth understand not only themselves but also the tradition in which they are situated. More than anything else, it is the reformulation of the problem of rationalization through social philosophy that allows these authors to differentiate themselves from the first generation of German Critical Theory. Later, Honneth will state it clearly:

> The critique of society can be based on ideals within the given social order that at the same time can justifiably be shown to be the expression of progress in the process of social rationalization. To this extent, the critical model of the Frankfurt School presupposes if not precisely a philosophy of history, then a concept of the directed development of human rationality. Without a demanding theoretical program of this kind, it hardly seems to me possible to speak of a specific identity of Critical Theory that can somehow be distinguished from the other approaches to social criticism.[52]

Correspondingly, it is from this perspective that they will seek to interpret Foucault's work and distinguish themselves from it. The attempt to read Foucault's work as a reformulation of the "theory of social rationalization" finds its most explicit and elaborated version, as seen previously, in Honneth's *Critique of Power*.

At issue here is not specifically the most consistent and rigorous way of interpreting Foucault, nor his relationship with Weber, but the Frankfurt School tradition's self-understanding of itself and how this self-understanding directs the way it deals with Foucault's work. It seems noteworthy anyway that this interpretation of the Weberian problem of social rationalization takes place in terms that privilege a systemic approach that conceives it as a theory of social evolution, in proximity with the vision of an interpreter such as Wolfgang Schluchter (1985). Alternatively, there is in fact a more historicist approach on the issue that could perhaps illuminate a more consistent way of relating Foucault and Weber, as suggested by authors like Bernhard Waldenfels (1986) and Colin Gordon (1987), for example. From this point of view, it would be possible to say that Foucault differentiates between rationalization as the specific way in which one "rationalizes" about something (thinks about something) and, on the other hand, as a process of expansion of the form of thought characteristic of European "rationalism".[53] While Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as Habermas, take up the second meaning, the idea of rationalization as worked on by Foucault seems to point to the first. The history of the rationalization of the exercise of power undertaken from a genealogical point of

[52] Axel Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory* (2009), 51.

[53] Colin Gordon, "The soul of the citizen: Max Weber and Michel Foucault on rationality and government," in *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*, ed. Scott Lasch and Sam Whimster (1987), 293-295.

view seeks to pay attention to the plurality of forms of rationality present in specific areas of analysis with the aim of recomposing the web of alliances that allowed them to emerge in history. It is not possible to speak of "rationalization", therefore, unless it refers to the multiple contexts in which a given set of social practices is effectively rationalized, problematized and thus transformed. This process is not unidirectional or necessary. It is the result of the conjunction of a multiplicity of specific processes that have influenced the transformation of practices and the forms of political rationality and subjectivity.

One might say that this view in fact corresponds to a dissolution of the problem of "social rationalization," as conceived by Adorno and Horkheimer or Habermas, since there is no longer a general point of view from which rationality could be judged; this point being the communicative or instrumental reason with emancipatory interest. This understanding, *i.e.*, the acceptance of this dissolution is, in my view, implicit in the new forms of reading Foucault from the perspective of the Frankfurt School. Authors like Martin Saar and specially Amy Allen will, to a certain extent, ignore this problem, arguing, for example, that this perspective is intrinsically Eurocentric since it unequivocally posits "formal" European rationality as universal.[54] The genealogical point of view, on the other side, would configure itself as a solution to this problem since it takes the connection between relations of power and forms of rationality not from an external perspective but from an immanent and radical historical way that manifests itself precisely in processes of subjectivation, that is, in the practices that constitute historically the forms of subjectivity.[55] In what follows, I will try to show how theses authors attempt to incorporate this genealogical insight in a perspective of social critique that still aims to remain inside the framework of the Frankfurtian tradition since they remain committed to a kind of normative dimension that would supplement the pure genealogical description of the ways in which subjectivity is produced historically while at the same time abandon the question of "social rationalization".

THE APPROPRIATION OF FOUCAULT'S WORK AND THE REFORMULATION OF THE TASKS OF CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY IN LIGHT OF THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECTIVATION

More recently, authors like Martin Saar and Amy Allen have tended to argue that genealogical criticism is, to a large extent, superior to the models of "rational reconstruction" proposed by Habermas as the flagship, so to speak, of critical reflection. This superiority would arise, on

[54] Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (2016), 25-26.

[55] Other authors that could be linked to the Frankfurt School's tradition, such as Robin Celikates, Rahel Jaeggi and Titus Stahl, will also completely ignore this problem of "social rationalization". Conversely to Allen and Saar, who will wager for genealogy, their fundamental focus will be more precisely on the meaning of social critique as "immanent critique" and its methodological aspects, placing it synchronically in an open field of "practices". Unfortunately, here is not the place to develop this, but I would argue that this pure methodological turn is in fact a symptom of the change that I am trying to specify here, *viz.*, the dissolution of the problem of "social rationalization" in the name of an analysis of the process of subjectivation or, similarly, "forms life"(another concept for what in my view indicates the same problem). It is precisely because the Frankfurtian tradition seems to have lost its object ("social rationalization") that *the need for* a new methodological reflection can take place. For an extended account on the methodological turn, cf. De Caux (2021).

the one hand, from the fact that Foucault was concerned with understanding how "power" is intrinsic to the "social" and, on the other hand, due to his focus on what they consider truly central: the process of "subjectivation." Saar and Allen's argument is that Foucault does not have such an impoverished view of the "social" as presupposed by Habermas, Fraser, and Honneth, and, moreover, he allows for a more adequate account of how processes of subjectivation are shaped by power relations.

Amy Allen's critical project, to some extent analogous to Honneth's, involves an articulation between Foucault's and Habermas's thought. This project can be summarized by the attempt to derive the political consequences of a social philosophy that reconstructs the "social" from the theoretical insights of both Foucault and Habermas simultaneously. From Allen's perspective, both are thinkers whose productivity can hardly be contested but who are positioned on opposite sides of a division that runs through classical social and political philosophy. According to her:

> Habermas and Foucault can be understood as contemporary representatives of two opposing traditions of thought in political and social philosophy. Habermas focuses on the rationality inherent in our social practices and political institutions, a rationality that, for him, is rooted in their communicative structure, placing him in the long and illustrious tradition of political thought that stretches from Kant to Plato. Foucault's emphasis on power, by contrast, places his lineage in a trajectory that can be traced from Nietzsche and Machiavelli to Thrasymachus. In fact, as noted by Ben Flyvbjerg, the respective projects of Habermas and Foucault accentuate an "essential tension" in thinking about politics and society: the tension between "consensus and conflict, ideas and reality," or, to put it more broadly, between rationality and power.[56]

It is the fundamental tension between "rationality" on the one side and "power" on the other that, for her, lies at the heart of the differences between Foucault and Habermas.[57] To a large extent, it is precisely this tension that has so far made a "productive dialogue" between these authors unfeasible. The literature dealing with the relationship between Foucault and Habermas "either articulates Habermas's standard criticisms of Foucault – accusations of performative contradiction or normative confusion – or offers a defense against these criticisms in favor of Foucault".[58] This makes it difficult to recognize the possibility of articulating their positions based on the thesis that they are "so profoundly different that it would be futile to aim for some kind of theoretical or meta-theoretical perspective in which these differences can be integrated into a common framework".[59] Against this position, Allen argues "that there is room for a middle ground".[60]

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[56] Amy Allen, "Discourse, Power, Subjectivation: the Foucault-Habermas debate reconsidered," *The Philosophical Forum* 40:1 (2009), 2-3.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Allen, "Discourse, Power, Subjectivation," 3-4.
[59] Bent Flyberg, "Ideal Theory, Real Rationality: Habermas versus Foucault and Nietzsche," paper for the Political Studies Association's 50'th Annual Conference, April (2000), 1-2.
[60] "Discourse, Power, Subjectivation," 3-4.

However, given the impossibility of integrating all aspects of both thinkers' ideas, Allen focuses on the theme that, for her, is central to the debate, namely, their respective approaches to "subjectivation".[61] Her aim is to "lay the groundwork for an approach to subjectivation that draws on conceptual insights from both sides of the debate, modifying and recombining their views as necessary".[62] By proceeding in this manner, she hopes to "move the Foucault/Habermas debate onto new and more productive ground by developing an approach to 'subjectivation' that retrieves insights from both sides."[63] The term "subjectivation," for Allen, "refers to the process by which newborns are transformed into competent subjects who possess the capacity to think, deliberate, and act," a process in which both Foucault and Habermas are interested.[64] However, each of them presents a partial view of this process. After explaining Habermas's approach to individuation as socialization in terms of social psychology and moral development through Mead, Piaget, and Kolberg, Allen concludes that, for him, the process of "subjectivation" occurs through the "medium of communicative action".[65] Foucault, on the other hand, agrees, she believes, "that the individual is formed from the outside in," but for him, the "outside" – the social relations in which and through which subjects are constituted – is structured by power relations, where power is understood primarily in strategic, not communicative terms.[66] In this sense, "Foucault's genealogical works of the 1970s aim to show that disciplinary and normalizing power relations form, for us, the 'outside' through which the 'inside' of the modern subject is constituted".[67] Note that here, even if in a nuanced way, Allen explicitly supports, like Honneth, that for Foucault, "social relations" and "power relations" are synonymous and that the "social," as "power," constitutes the "outside" of subjectivity.

Allen's conclusion is that Habermas and Foucault offer a one-sided approach to "subjectivation." While "Habermas emphasizes its communicative, rational, and intersubjective aspects, Foucault emphasizes its filling by power".[68] Given this partiality, and imagining herself in a consistent position to critique both, Allen argues that subjectivation "necessarily involves both communicative rationality and power relations".[69] In this sense, she contends, much like Honneth, that for Foucault to account for the role of communicative rationality in the process of subjectivation, he would need to substantially expand his conception of the "social".[70] Unlike Honneth and Habermas, Allen even mentions that in his later research, as opposed to that developed in the 1970s, Foucault had opened up space for "communication" when he recognized that both "communication" and "power" are "interconnected types of relationships that indeed always overlap with each other and support each other reciprocally".[71] However,

[61] "Discourse, Power, Subjectivation", 4.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] "Discourse, Power, Subjectivation", 14.
[65] "Discourse, Power, Subjectivation", 16.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] "Discourse, Power, Subjectivation", 5.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.
[71] "Discourse, Power, Subjectivation", 23.

"these insights into the nature of communicative relationships and their connections with power remained underdeveloped".[72]

> The relative inattention of Habermas to the entanglement of the process of subjectivation in power relations makes it difficult for him to offer a sufficiently satisfying theoretical-critical approach to some of the most pressing social issues of our time, including sexism and racism, which are largely reproduced and maintained by the production of modes of identity subordination. Although Foucault's work is widely recognized as better suited to undertake such a task, his relative neglect of the communicative dimension of social relations diminishes his ability to satisfactorily theorize the possibilities of individual and collective resistance aimed at transforming the domination relationships that his own work helps to expose. In this sense, these two approaches seem to be complementary: Foucault emphasizes the role of disciplinary practices in the formation of the autonomous subject, while Habermas emphasizes how, in achieving autonomy, the subject can critically reflect on disciplinary practices.[73]

By recognizing the complementarity of these authors' theses, Allen argues that we can arrive at a more adequate perspective regarding philosophy and political practice. This complementarity allows us to escape the pitfalls that could arise from both Habermasian universalism and Foucauldian skepticism. In other words, according to Allen, it is about reclaiming with Foucault and Habermas, but also against both, a "contextualist and pragmatic" position.

> Recomposing Habermas's metatheoretical claims about the status of his normative idealizations in a more contextualist and pragmatic way would take him beyond where he feels secure, toward a kind of skepticism about the universality of those idealizations and, thus, about the transcendent validity of moral norms that can be justified through them. However, such a move does not necessarily result in moral nihilism or immorality, something that Habermas seems to fear. Foucault's moral skepticism is perfectly compatible (...) with the acceptance of substantive normative commitments, recognizing that these commitments are understood as specific and local, rooted in contingent social practices connected to power/knowledge relations.[74]

Allen aims to draw the consequences of this positive synthesis for political philosophy. The insufficiency of the approach to "subjectivation" by Habermas and Foucault corresponds to an equal incapacity to think "political action" and, more specifically, to provide an adequate concept of "autonomy" that can underpin it. By questioning the conception of "autonomy" in both authors, she proposes a second synthesis that can serve as a more suitable normative foundation for social critique.[75] The argument is that the fundamental tension underlying the disagreements between Foucault and Habermas regarding the "social" is reflected in a

[72] Ibid.
[73] "Discourse, Power, Subjectivation", 24.
[74] "Discourse, Power, Subjectivation", 27.
[75] Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (2008).

divergence concerning the notion of "autonomy." While Habermas is committed to an idea of autonomy as "universalist emancipation" (given his concept of "social" based on "communicative interaction"), Foucault is committed to an idea of autonomy as "contextual liberation" (given his concept of the social as "conflict"). Allen's response to this tension is to argue that "autonomy" is better understood as "critical self-transformation," that is, as the "capacity" to, on the one hand, "critically reflect on power/knowledge relationships that have constituted subjectivity" and, on the other hand, "to engage critically in self-transformation practices".[76]

In parallel, Martin Saar also appropriates Foucault's work to reformulate the task of critical social theory and emphasize the focus on processes of subjectivation. "If the task of social philosophy is understood in terms of a critique of power, then a proper understanding of power becomes a requirement".[77] "Social philosophy," in this sense, appears as an eminently "critical" discipline, that is, a discipline that has a "constitutive critical intention" insofar as it has always been dedicated to theorizing the "intersection" between society and subjectivity from their "incongruity".[78] This "incongruity," which is an expression of a "moment of negativity" between subjectivity and society, has always had, according to Saar, the name "power." If the "incongruity" between the individual and society is, in itself, a matter of "power," and if social philosophy is the form of reflection that takes on the task of thinking it, then it could, according to Saar, simply be reformulated as "critique of power".[79]. For him, in short, social philosophy is "critique of power," and vice versa. The concept of "power," therefore, as a central element of social philosophy, must be adequately formulated if it wishes to carry out all its claims.

According to Saar, the effort to think about how "power" constitutes social reality finds its exemplary form in Foucault's thought. This is because, for Foucault, "power" designates "the structural and dynamic element of every social relationship," as it does not express "the force of a powerful individual" but, instead, in Foucault's words, "the name given to a strategic situation in a particular society".[80] However, according to Saar, Foucault pays a price for the generality of his concept. Based on it, "no 'situation' can be described as completely free of power, and no social interaction can be understood as fundamentally outside the concept of power".[81] This conception of "power" as intrinsic to the "social" implies a reformulation of the task of critique. According to Saar, Foucault's historical investigations provide "clues," even if in more "performative" than "argumentative" terms, on how to proceed. This means that the "critique of power" must trace

> The history, concrete, exact, and distant, of power relations, their emergence, and transformation, for only an analysis of this kind can reveal the establishment and maintenance of social institutions and norms that appear as natural and confront

[76] Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves* (2009), 44.
[77] Martin Saar, "Power and critique," *Journal of Power* 3:1 (2010), 7.
[78] Saar, "Power and critique", 7-8.
[79] "Power and critique", 9.
[80] "Power and critique", 15.
[81] Ibid.

> the individual as given and valid. The critique of power is, first and foremost, the liquefaction and subversion of power structures and relations through analysis.[82]

According to Saar, for Foucault, "power" takes the form of the constitution of the "social" as the "space of emergence" or "production" of "bodies, beings, subjectivities, and other elements of social ontology".[83] The "critique of power" appears in these terms as the "documentation of the processes of constitution of social ontology, which, once known, extend our understanding of possible spaces for action and the constitution of social life, thus creating the conditions of possibility for new modes of acting and 'being-in-the-world'".[84]

Despite the distinctions, it would be possible to say that both Allen and Saar still start from the horizon set by Honneth in the movement that begins with *The Critique of Power*. Honneth's critique of Habermas, as well as the task of grounding critique in a concept of the "social" that takes into account power relations, is in the background of the appropriations made by Amy Allen and Martin Saar of Foucault's thought. However, the focus of genealogical critique, for them, unlike what was presupposed in Honneth, will not be exactly "society" but "subjectivity." While Honneth interprets genealogical critique as a social critique that takes the form of a history of society guided by a theory of society based on power relations, for Saar and Allen, the central aim of genealogical critique is to describe the process of the emergence of subjectivity amidst social relations.

The difference is subtle but significant. If for Habermas and Honneth, Foucault's aim is to account, so to speak, for the "disciplining" of society, for Saar and Allen, his aim becomes to account for the "disciplining" of subjectivity. As they like to emphasize, it is the "subject," and not "power," that is the focus of Foucault's research. This difference shows that Allen and Saar, unlike Habermas, Fraser, and Honneth, no longer interpret genealogical critique as a reformulation of the "theory of social rationalization" but as a "theory of subjectivation." By "subjectivation," they understand the process by which "individuals" become "subjects" within power and communication relations. In these terms, the urgent task of a critical theory of society becomes, for them, the elaboration of a general "grammar" of the "social" that aims less to account for patterns of distortion in the direction of society as a whole, as would be the case in the classic works of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas, and more to support the identification of patterns of distortion in the processes of identity formation.

Taking this into consideration, in my view, a dividing line can be drawn whose origin dates back to the consequences drawn by Honneth from the reformulation of social philosophy by Habermas. It is as if, in the wake of Honneth, who in his critique of Habermas appropriated Foucault's work to emphasize how social conflicts affect identity formation, highlighting the side of "society" and thinking about the "grammar of social conflicts", Allen and Saar identified the need to focus on how the interference of the "social" in the constitution of identity occurs from the side of the "individual," leading to an approach to social philosophy in terms of "theory of subjectivation". The theme of social rationalization will then give way to the question of subject formation in the midst of power relations.

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[82] "Power and critique," 16.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Through the works of Amy Allen and Martin Saar, the relationship between the Frankfurt School tradition and Foucault's work has undergone substantial changes. It no longer represents a competing perspective, as was the case for Habermas, or a reflective stage within the tradition, as in Honneth, but rather a model from which the very task of critical theory and its fundamental assumptions are reconstructed in light of the Foucauldian problem of the relationship between power and subjectivation. This is not just a matter of a better understanding of Foucault's project but rather a consequence of a fundamental reformulation of the problems of a critical social theory. In this work, I have attempted to outline how Foucault has been interpreted by authors affiliated with the Frankfurt School tradition and how this shift in perspective occurred. I argued that Foucault's genealogical critique is interpreted by them, on the one hand, as a "theory of social rationalization" (Habermas, Fraser, Honneth) and, on the other hand, as a "theory of subjectivation" (Allen and Saar). Understood as a "theory of social rationalization," genealogical critique would show how societies are constituted to intensify social mechanisms of domination. Understood as a "theory of subjectivation," genealogical critique would demonstrate how subjectivity emerges within social relations understood themselves as "power relations," i.e., strategic actions in which individuals seek to act forcefully on the conduct of others to assert their interests, without a necessary reference to an encompassing and totalizing social process. The point of reconstructing these interpretations of genealogical criticism is not to ascertain which one is correct but rather to highlight the fact that they reveal a significant aspect of the way these critical theorists conceptualize their own work. This enables the discernment of a set of fundamental theoretical and practical commitments underlying what would initially appear to be a simple issue of interpretation. Habermas, Fraser, and Honneth tend to interpret Foucault's work as a reformulation of the "theory of social rationalization" because, for them, reformulating it is the fundamental task of critical social theory. Conversely, Allen and Saar tend to interpret it as a "theory of subjectivation" precisely because they believe that the development of a critique of modes of subjectivation is this fundamental task. There are no more appeals to "a concept of the directed development of human rationality" that was once thought as essential for the tradition.[85] In any case, the fact that this appropriation is even possible is in itself a sign of what could be thought as a transformation of the "discursive order" of critical theory that defies the very meaning of the tradition; a change that emerges with the dissolution of the problem of "social rationalization" and the rise of the problem of processes of subjectivation in relation to power.

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[85] Honneth, "*Pathologies of Reason*", 51.

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