

Critical Theory after the Ontological Turn Eight (plus Two) Propositions

o. The question of ontology has gained new prominence in the wake of the rather recent “material” or, as is it also often called, “ontological turn” in the humanities and social sciences. It remains controversial whether this turn installs a “new materialism” or merely actualizes older materialist themes (or fails to do so). It still also remains open whether materialism as a philosophical orientation might not remain fundamentally opposed to ontological thinking as such (a position defended by Adorno and many others, mainly against Heidegger and his followers).

Finally, it is striking that most prominent protagonists of Critical Theory (in the doctrinal or school sense) tend not to engage with these discourses even if they touch on the fundamental issues of critical social theory: power, domination, practices, institutions and the limits and dynamics of “the social”. Some reflections on method and critical form in materialist and/or ontological accounts of politics and society and their relation to the program of a critical theory (in the wide sense) are meant to contribute to this debate.

Historically, the aversion of Critical Theory (in the narrower sense of the Frankfurt project of a critical theory of society) to ontology is well-documented. Its most passionate expression is Adorno’s struggle with Heidegger, from the early polemics against Heidegger in *Die Aktualität der Philosophie* from 1931 against *Lebensphilosophie* and new ontologies to the Paris lectures from 1958 that presented the core concepts and idea of the *Negative Dialektik* (published in 1966) that was about to be written, and prominently in the lectures on dialectics and ontology from 1960/61.

The charge against ontology is threefold: the latter is supposed to be 1. anti-historical (denying the temporal nature of reality), and therefore 2. essentialist (positing eternal features of things), 3. de-politicizing (concealing the social nature of human relations). This is a methodological and political critique at the same time. For Adorno, on the methodological level this meant replacing ontology with (negative) dialectics.

Within the context of philosophies close to Adorno, it was Alfred Schmidt who coined the interesting phrase (and argued for the desideratum of a) “negative ontology of nature” in the 1960s. Adorno’s radical critique was extended by Habermas in the 1980s in a series of attacks on contemporary thinkers which saw ontologization as the main problem. This settling of accounts with “neo-ontological” theories (levelled against Foucault and what Habermas at the time perceived as neo-Heideggerian thinking) still shapes many discussion within Critical Theory until today.

In what follows, I will try to propose defense of (a certain kind of) ontology in eight steps or propositions.

1. In spite of the long-standing polemic and resistance of Critical Theory against ontology and any form of ontological theorizing, every theory of society will be in need of ontological elements. A critical theory (that has to be a material theory of society or social reality, a theory of social being and beings, as it were) cannot not be ontological. – There are at least two interconnected usages or meanings of the term “ontology” in play here. I mostly refer to the first, on the level of theory, that refers to the philosophical discourse concerning ontological elements and could also be called “ontological theory”; the second, on the level of reality itself, often refers to those objects themselves, e.g. in the formulation “multiple ontologies” and the like.

Needing ontology here is a methodological question. Knowing and naming the elements of reality a theory is thought to refer to, its *Gegenstandsbereich*; explicating the reality and the constitution of these elements is speaking to or about their ‘being’, their ‘ontology’ in the theoretical, methodological sense; this ‘being’ or reality is what makes them elements or entities in the social realm, gives them a place, a density, rules of constitution and transformation.

One can, of course, call also the plane or set of entities (‘beings’) ‘ontology’, this withdraws the Post-Aristotelian/Heideggerian distinction between the ‘ontic’ and the ‘ontological’, and there might be good reasons for this, indeed the most convincing version of ontological theory today problematize or even withdraw this distinction (e.g. Marchart, Agamben). But for terminological reasons one might stick to calling ‘ontology’ proper the attempt to talk about entities/beings (i.e. ontological theory) and not the mass of those entities/beings themselves. This alternative way of talking has a certain popularity in anthropology (Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and others).

There is, evidently, a related but different *façon de parler* in other disciplines, so you easily find instructions like “Ontology Development 101: A Guide to Creating Your First Ontology” in coding and computer science, or systematic discussions of the “Ontologie des Immaterialgüterrechts” (Peuckert). This comes close(r) to the first usage described here.

2. Ontology (theoretically speaking) is the discourse concerning actually constitutive elements within a given field or realm of reality, their structural features and possible transformations and connections between these elements. It does not coincide with (but is of course also not wholly distinct from) a discourse on conceivability or the conditions of possibility of knowing these elements, features and transformations. Ontology (in this sense) of course is not unrelated to but does not coincide with

epistemology. It will contain a vision of the human mind and its relation to objects but it will not reduce the question after things (or beings) to their being-thought.

The debate on “correlationism” (prominent in authors attributed to the rather diverse “Speculative Realism” movement; most notably Quentin Meillassoux) is part of this issue, but the critical distance to a purely epistemological point of view is also already contained in the pragmatist and/or pragmatic, hermeneutical, existentialist, and structuralist and materialist attacks on idealism, rationalism, and cognitivism. All of these strands of thought were attacking an abstract vision of a subject knowing objects that did not take into account the embodied, material, situated nature of the subject that is at the same time source and effect of relations of knowing and constitution. One might call this change of perspective a turn to the materiality of the subject, it implies an emphasis on the ontological reality of the knowing subject, i.e. its being placed, situated, its being a living, bodily entity that also happens to enter into epistemic relations with other subjects and objects.

This change of emphasis that makes epistemic relation just one dimension among others does not deny the importance (and intricacy) of epistemological questions. There is, after all, the question of how to know about ontological realities without succumbing to the seductions of positivism, be they empirical or philosophical. (This was one of the main charges of Adorno against Heidegger, namely that “fundamental ontology” cannot but ‘posit’ the givenness of *Dasein* and its existential features.) But this stance avoids an epistemicism that reduces all that it to its being-thought, and it even attempts to open the question of knowledge to non-pure, empirical perspectives, like the sociology of knowledge, historical anthropology, and, indeed, within philosophy proper, social epistemology. These are ways of looking at thinking as an essentially intersubjective, interactive, maybe even ‘transindividual’ process (to use Simondon’s or Balibar’s term).

! 3. The ontology (i.e. the theory of things, i.e. of subjects and objects) adequate for the description and understanding of complex and inherently stratified societies (this is what a “critical theory of society” will try to do) is a processual, relational (or even relationalist) ontology that elucidates the complex interplay of material forces, social practices and subjectivities. Since none of these elements is a-temporal nor a-historical, the adequate social and political ontology (to be used in describing them) cannot be a-temporal or a-historical either.

When we start thinking about the content of a social theory, thought of as a ontology of social things, i.e. of subjects and objects, we might be tempted to draw a chart of separate, isolated entities, some of them in groups, like a sociological Noah’s Ark (implying an ‘ontology of things’). But to start from a basic, maybe

modern sense of the social (maybe derived from Durkheim, or Weber) already implies a relational account. We just call ‘social’ what are not simply features of individual entities, but their relations. Viewed as social things, subjects and objects are part of a larger whole, part of processes of socialization: Subjects that are recognized or excluded, objects to be traded, sanctified or destroyed, idea to be transmitted or censured, bodies to be marked or hidden etc. Becoming social seems to be nothing else than entering into a circuit or pattern of relations, and this holds true for the upper level of social totalities, the middle level of social practices, and the lower level of individual social subjects. On all of these levels, we find social realities that realize themselves, that only gain reality, in processual, relational form.

! 4. This ontology corresponding to a critical theory of society will most likely be “materialist” in a certain sense, meaning that it (theoretically) allows for and even requires propositions concerning material conditions for non-material events, states of affairs and effects. This means to claim that how societies operate is conditioned by or premised on its material foundations (in the weak sense), presuppositions and contexts. Theoretically and methodologically allowing for effective material conditions makes such a vision materialist (as opposed to idealist, spiritualist, intentionalist etc.). – A prime example is the theoretical discourse on “subjectivation” that allows for non-subjective factors “making” or “making up” subjects. ?

Pointing to the material and/or ontological dimension of (the thinking of) society or social reality entails pointing to material or ontological factors that make up or constitute society (that is in itself, as pointed out earlier, a relational reality). So this theory will try to account for the formation or establishment of social facts (or realities) and it will claim that no social reality emerges out of nothing but that indeed society is a dynamic or transactional realm where elements are re-constituted, transformed and re-interpreted all the time. The historicity and constructedness is its nature, so to say, or its mode of being.

This allows or even calls for the concrete and empirical thick description of how certain subjects and objects, identities, subjectivities, practices, forms of interaction, institutions or meanings came about or came into being. An ontology, a theory of the ‘being’ of these things, will accordingly be dynamic or social-constructivist (in a wider sense); it will try to account for variability and change, but also for (relative) stability and durability. A modern society, after all, is the very thing that stays the same or itself while all of its elements change and transform all the time. ?

! 5. Claims about material conditioning or determination (in reality) do not commit to any full-fledged reductive claims about the priority of this direction of explanation (in theory) nor about fully known objective relations of cause and effect (in social reality

itself). The option for “materialism” as one version of ontological theory therefore can only refer to the possibility of determining material conditions, not to their exclusive or fundamental status. – This ontology can therefore, methodologically speaking, remain “post-foundationalist” where most older materialist theories were not. It can remain pluralist or multi-dimensional.

As postulated earlier, a material or ontological description of the constitution and formation of social entities or realities (and of course their corresponding forms of destruction or decreation) relies on the fact that the emergence of new social elements can be assessed, explained, analyzed with reference to elements that are already there (and this is what a social ontology, or an ontological theory of the social will try to do). Nothing in this outlook prevents us from also allowing for the power of ideas, of discourse, of symbolic transformations or normative reflection to actually lead to material consequences. Attention to the material does not imply reduction to it.

The ‘new materialism’ propagated in recent years most of the times tries to inhabit such a non-orthodox position and allows for non-standard forms of agency and casual effectiveness of matter or nature (in Bennett or Latour) or allow for patterns of causality that are in itself non-linear and recursive (as in Barad and Haraway). None of this is related to any reductivist claim about the primacy of matter. For most ‘new materialists’ (notably of Deleuzian or Neo-Spinozist persuasion), matter and mind might not be opposites after all.

6. The debate on “weak ontology” was a first step to account for the ontological dimension of theories that *seemed* to be post-or anti-ontological and that were definitely anti-essentialist. It remains to be argued that Critical Theory especially (in its older and newer forms) performs theoretical operations that are, in this sense, “weakly” ontological yet anti-essentialist. Notions like society, power, ideology, social structure, subject, even politics and democracy have an ontological dimension and status: they define the objects of inquiry in so far they are seen to be real, effective parts of social reality. – Castoriadis and Lefort, Laclau and Marchart can be seen as protagonists of a social and political philosophy that is (in this sense) ontological and reinterprets its key concepts in an ontological way. Heidegger, and Arendt, Marcuse and Bloch of course are classic authors proceeding in a similar way.

Stephen K. White in his book “Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory” from 2000 was suggesting a framework for discussing the work of Taylor, Kateb, Butler, and Connolly that there is a new form of post-hermeneutical or post-structuralist theorizing that combines a methodological resistance to totalization with an interest in ontological questions and that incorporates temporality, dynamism and contingency into the very ontological framework. “Weak” here definitely

means non-essentialist and historicized; that these (rather heterogeneous) analyses deserve to be called “ontological” refers to their interest in constitution and deconstitution of identities, selves, mentalities and self-understanding.

But seen in this way, many other former theories already were ‘weak’ ontologies, non-totalizing, non-reductive social theories that left room for contingency (or overdetermination) while still trying to “read” the present as a site of constitution and formation of social realities. One might indeed, Marchart and Laclau seem to go there, read a whole strand of Post-Marxist Left Theory as a version of this: a historico-ontological account of the coming-about of the capitalist world and its subjects and objects (cf. R. Nigro). Authors like Lukács and Bloch, Gramsci or Castoriadis then seem more explicit in spelling out this ontological dimension while other don’t. For me it is no coincidence, that many authors from the Frankfurt School tradition (following Lukács) clearly saw this dimension.

7. Concepts or notions in their ontological usage refer to the structures, processes and mechanisms constituting or “making” a common world, a shared space, a lived community. However, this is also what a C/critical T/theory is all about: describing, assessing, problematizing these constitutions. – Even the theory of capitalism is aiming at something similarly deep: capitalist world-making and the making of a capitalist world (including its value(s), its practices, its subjects, its life-forms).

-> Seen from this more methodological perspective, ontological talk is not an obstacle to critique, but its *organon*: It prepares the level on which concrete critical acts can be executed like the demystification of certain meanings or authorities, the denaturalization of certain identities or institutions, the reinterpretation of values and traditions. What these acts attack are social “realities” or “beings”, parts of people’s lives and experience, material conditions and causal networks.

It might be in this sense that Marx’s critique of capitalism is a theory of constitution, that the theory of value is not a theory of illusions but of highly effective elements of a social world that in itself is coherent and functional. In a capitalist world, value in all of its forms “exists”, however distortive this worlds might seem from a perspective that does not rely on its very specific historical conditions. Critically redescribing a certain social world is attacking it on this level of reality or being, it is an “insurrection at the level of ontology” (Butler on Foucault, 2004a: 33) .

8. Not denying the factual ontological status, nor denying the possible reality-effects (i.e. the ontological power) of things, persons and natures constituted in and by society (on the level of social reality) allows for critical operations indispensable for any critical social theory: de-naturalization (the critique of domination in an ontological register),

-> re-description (reassessing the ontological landscape) and the discovery of agency (unleashing the ontological potential for transformation, i.e. for politics) where there seemed to be none. Critique and resistance therefore are in themselves ontological acts, acts of onto-critique and onto-resistance, i.e. material, specific, and concrete practices situated within the immanence of the social itself.

! Even if a critique always presupposes someone who has to gain a perspective on a social totality who is not *fully* determined by it, the ontological critique of a society does not import any external standards or criteria, it can operate on an immanent basis, given that it allows for temporal and synchronic change and transformation. And these descriptions, after all provided by social subjects that are somewhat part of the social totality (Horkheimer is right on this point) are themselves events or processes within that social reality. So the ontological character of the theory, methodologically speaking, affects the content and the function of the theory itself, since it is employed or realized within social reality itself. This is also something Marx (and many others speculating on the material dimension of theoretical work) had in mind when he tried to account for the historical and social conditions in which revolutionary theory turns into (or combines itself with) a material reality of revolution.

Addenda

9. We might suspect that the seemingly restricted reflection on “nature” (in all its senses) within older and current Critical Theory also refers back to an un-clear relation to ontological theorizing. It might very well be that non- or anti-ontological theories of nature necessarily remain insufficient. – The success and plausibility of much of the New Materialism seems to testify to this fact. Not taking up the discussion with Latour, Barad, Connolly, Bennett, Braidotti, Lemke and many others means missing the chance of contributing to some of the most pressing debates of our time.

Critical Theory has been accused of methodological anthropocentrism or socio-centrism, and this is, given its intellectual origins and its social-theoretical orientation, hard to deny completely. Left-Hegelianism and/or Western Marxism is, first and foremost, a conception of human emancipation and a vision of the overcoming of social domination. Indeed, read without many sympathies, Hegel and Marx could be seen as crucial protagonists of “modern” thought (in the sense of Latour), opening a severe separation between the non-human and the human, nature and history, nature and culture, etc., and playing into the phantasm of the sovereign agency of humankind. However, Hegel and Marx (and Nietzsche and Freud, the other main references for Critical Theory) might also be seen as part of an anti-dualistic counter-tendency in modern thought, keenly invested in overcoming these conceptual opposition and systematically placing man in nature. The dialectical perspective on the relation between nature and Spirit

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or natural history and human history would then amount to nothing less than an non-anthropocentric alternative within Western philosophy.

Many older and current reading of the 'green' or 'ecological' Marx (from Engels to Castoriadis to John Bellamy Foster, Jason Moore and Nancy Fraser and, most recently, Judith Butler) have shown just how productive such an interpretation can be and how closely it might fit current eco-critical concerns. Critical Theory at least partially was also part of this discourse. Alfred Schmidt's seminal early book on nature in Marx is a case in point, and Marcuse's late texts on the ecological movement might be the most intensive contribution.

But right from the start, in Adorno's (appropriation of Benjamin's) "Idea of Natural-History" and most prominently in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, nature figures prominently, as a force and a figure and an deniably constitutive part of the social and of the social imaginary. Bloch and Benjamin might be the two authors that come closest to articulating these issues in ontological terms, but for the whole tradition it seems decisive to show how nature is part of social relations and is framing them at the same time. One might argue that this starting-point might even help to counter some pitfalls of much of contemporary ecological holistic thinking that tends to lose a sense for the ideological uses of nature and its interrelation with relations of domination.

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10. The mode or method in which critical-ontological, post-Marxist theorizing proceeds does deserve the term "immanent" or even "immanentist" but not in the sense of values, standards or criteria being immanent to their critique (this is what most current readings construe as Hegel's model of "immanence critique"). Rather, it refers to the immanent plane of processes within society, or nature, or history, their being-placed on one ontological level. – Such an operation brings Critical Theory dangerously close to other (more or less) monist background theories of which naturalism is the most common and powerful in the current era, and of which Neo-Spinozism or Neo-Deleuzianism might seem more promising options. It will remain to be seen whether there is the possibility to develop a critical conception of immanence, a critical immanentism.

The debate on "forms of critique" had an important methodological function for current Critical Theory and it has helpfully pointed out the variety (and pluralism) of critical methods. Its classificatory results (i.e. the distinction between constructive reconstructive and deconstructive approaches to critique) sometimes tended to construct alternatives and made invisible continuities and transitions between the somewhat reified models. In my understanding, it has proven productive to understand the claim to "immanent critique" not only from the perspective of form of method, but also from the substantial claims of a "philosophy of immanence" maybe implied by some of Critical Theory's socio-theoretical commitments

outlined before. The critique of/in Critical Theory on the plane of practice or the social is directed against relations of domination. Its critique on the plane of theory is leveled against all vertical, hierarchical, asymmetrical claims to superiority or validity, one might call them (with a term to be qualified) “transcendent” theories or systems of thought.

One point of an ontological theory of critique is that it takes these two sides to be sides of the same coin, domination in social reality, and domination in normativity or thought. The anti-hierarchical, or radical-democratic orientation of most “left ontologies” of which a certain Critical Theory might be one, is grounded in, or articulated in, social reality itself, and can also be betrayed and denied there. There is no outside to this circuit, philosophy will never fully liberate itself from the world it thinks (but will also not be a mere reflection of it), the social world as we know is utterly depended on the ascriptions, meanings and validities ascribed to it (but is also not fully reducible to those meaning-giving acts). Critical Theory’s place is right in the middle of these struggles and dynamics.