

SOCIETY IN FLUX

Two Centuries of Social Theory

Edited by Harry F. Dahms

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES
IN SOCIAL THEORY

VOLUME 37

SOCIETY IN FLUX

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

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SOCIETY IN FLUX: TWO CENTURIES OF SOCIAL THEORY

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PREFACE

In an essay published as the “programmatic introduction” (Dahms, 2008; also Dandaneau, 2009) to volume 25 of *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* – the first volume published under my editorship – I contended that critical theory distinctively fills a key position and fulfills an important role in the wider field of social theory. Both the position and role of critical theory are related to the need to acknowledge and examine the *gravity concrete sociohistorical circumstances exert on social research*, as well as on theoretical projects and traditions in the social sciences. Absent such acknowledgment and focused examination, both social research and social theories are imminently in danger of reinforcing and perpetuating especially the problematic aspects and developments at work in modern societies in general, and in specific modern societies in particular, emphasizing aspects where the conflict between prevailing norms and values and material circumstances is most pronounced. Although much has been written about how education and educational institutions have been penetrated and altered due to corporate and political influence (including the trend for universities and colleges to be run like corporations), 13 years later, not much has changed, as far as critical reflexivity with regard to this gravity is concerned. Modern societies in general have been undergoing many major changes, and are continuing to do so, possibly at an accelerating rate, and at higher levels of intensity. Nevertheless, many social scientists and theorists continue to endeavor to illuminate what appears to be a growing number of phenomena in – and dimensions of – modern social life in the 21st century, often with ever more sophisticated tools and techniques, but without also making the effort to contemplate how both interest in particular phenomena and dimensions, and the tools employed to study them, may be influenced or shaped by the specific changes that have been occurring in politics, culture, economy, and society, and how research interests and tools may be prone to replicating and reproducing – and even amplifying – certain patterns and characteristics that ought to be illuminated rigorously. By implication, the concepts, methods, and frames relied upon may be in danger of concealing rather than revealing and drawing attention to those changes, without social scientists and theorists being fully (or sufficiently) cognizant of this fact. Among many changes that have been occurring since 2008, the spread and deepening of *neoliberalism* as an ideology, a generic mindset, and an organizational principle, have played a central role. Neoliberalism also has been the subject of extensive and focused attention, and indeed does have the potential of serving as a suitable lens to highlight the need to scrutinize the impact a changing world is having on our knowledge and understanding of this world, and how we are increasingly responsible for how this world is changing.

The first essay of this volume revisits the programmatic introduction of 2008, considers neoliberalism as both a very useful frame and a lens through which to discern how the underlying logic of modern societies manifests itself today, while recognizing that this frame and lens at the same time may be a symptom rather than a cause of this logic. The purpose of the essay is to pose the question of how social theorists should respond to the proliferating crises we are facing today and in the foreseeable future. What is the burden we must recognize and be willing to take on? To address this, I will employ as a foil – but not develop or discuss in detail – three concepts put forth by the classical critical theorists of the early Frankfurt School: *racket*, *authoritarian personality*, and *administered world*. Their purpose is to identify an important link between the last two centuries that saw the emergence and spread of modern societies, effectively transforming the face of our planet and threatening its future, and the *heteronomous* forces that have propelled and sustained these transformations, as they are pointing toward the possible termination of life on Earth – what is I am referring to as the prospect of *vitacide*.

The chapters in this volume are dedicated to three types of social theory: critical theory, classical theory, and systems theory.

The first chapter in Part I, by John Levi Martin, who has published in *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* before (see vols. 32, 35), is entitled “Critical Theory, the Imagination, and the Critique of Judgment: Horkheimer’s Vision Reconsidered.” A key feature of Critical Theory was the commitment to keeping alive the idea of alternatives to the existing cognitive order, partly in response to the contingent (and irrational) order of mature capitalism. As one of the first-generation critical theorists, Herbert Marcuse attributed to the Imagination the power to destroy the illusion of absent alternatives to existent reality, in the process developing an aesthetic social theory and a social theory of aesthetics. Yet, Max Horkheimer, the founder of critical theory, harbored suspicions as far as the Imagination was concerned, since it appeared to him to be a reproductive, rather than productive faculty – thus strengthening the power of existing reality over us. Martin contends that aspects of Horkheimer’s interpretation of the role of the Imagination related back to his early writings on Kant’s Third Critique, while he studied with Gestalt psychologist Hans Cornelius, in effect suggesting that the link between Horkheimer’s early Gestalt-influenced thinking and his later work may be stronger than has been recognized, and pointing toward possible directions for a post-Freudian critical theory.

The second chapter in Part I, by Alexander Stoner, addresses a different issue relating to critical theory. The title of this chapter is “Marx, Critical Theory, and the Treadmill of Production of Value: Why Environmental Sociology Needs a Critique of Capital,” and it is concerned with the tendency in Marxist-oriented environmental sociology and treadmill of production (ToP) theory to domesticate Marx’s critique of political economy. Stoner’s goal is to clarify the theoretical resources that may be available for a rigorous critique of capital-induced planetary degradation. With regard to the conceptualization of capital and value, ToP theory is deficient for reasons that have to do with the need to reconsider key aspects of Marx’s critical theory of modern capitalist society. The chapter

demonstrates the continued relevance of Marx's critical theory for understanding the political-economic, social, and ideational dimensions of planetary degradation. The critical-theory approach advocated conceptualizes the acceleration of environmental degradation following World War II in terms of a ToP of value, with the value form continuously being established in the present – while ToP theory critically examines the production of wealth by counterposing finitude and limits against the expansionary tendencies of economic growth. Marxian critical theory is conducive to scrutinizing the growth of environmentalism and the concomitant spread of neoliberalism.

Part II on classical theories includes chapters on an early twentieth-century sociologist and two founders of the discipline. In “Emil Lederer's Theory of the New Middle Class: Historical and Current Relevance of a Key Sociological Concept,” Sandro Segre formulates a theory of the so-called New Middle Class (*Neuer Mittelstand*), drawing from the writings of this German sociologist. The chapter first situates contributions by other fellow German sociologists to this field of studies, to then contextualize Lederer's theory in connection to contemporary formulations in stratification theory, including those of Giddens, Parkin, Murphy, Goldthorpe, and Wright, in the process revealing both continuities and fundamental differences in theoretical formulations. Based on Lederer's work, Segre proposes an alternative theory of the *Neuer Mittelstand* in the form of a set of mutually consistent statements. This theory confirms Lederer's position by emphasizing the New Middle Class's expectations and requests of social honor as a status group. Moreover, its inner heterogeneity is a cause of its social and political weakness. Yet, the absence or scarcity of ownership of the means of production might carry more weight than insufficient social status for those members of the *Neuer Mittelstand* who aspire to social recognition and power.

The second paper in this part is by Tobias Schlechtriemen, entitled, “Figuring the Beginning: Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer as Founding Figures of Sociology.” Critically reconstructing how Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer conceived of sociology as a new scientific discipline in the nineteenth century, the purpose of the chapter is to demonstrate how their founding ideas for sociology were creative responses to the challenge of inaugurating a new science. The resulting alternative perspective on two “founding fathers” provides a new strategy for reconceiving of sociology today. Schlechtriemen takes into account the theorists' self-descriptions and self-presentations as founders of sociology, considering also autobiographical texts. The resulting conceptual tension between the sociological subject matter, society as an ordered object, and the self-descriptions of the authors as exceptional scientists demonstrates how important the figurative elements are in this analysis. The result is a deeper understanding of the foundations of sociology. Figurative aspects can be found especially in the theorists' self-descriptions, and their textual and diagrammatical articulations can be understood as “founding figures” on which the idea of a figurative sociology is based.

Part III focuses on a more recent theorist whose legacy is still unfolding, potentially at an accelerating rate, even though he passed away more than two decades ago. The first chapter in this part is by Anthony J. Knowles, entitled, “Sociology as Social System: Luhmann, Enlightenment, and the Gap between

'Facts' and 'Norms,'" and is a critical analysis of how sociology presents itself as a vehicle for sociological "enlightenment." Recognizing that the roots of sociology as a science in the name of promoting social justice date back to the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, Luhmann's critiques of sociology and science are deployed to demonstrate how his systems approach exposes what is missing in sociology's current self-description and its "enlightenment" mission. The communication techniques and technologies of sociology, such as classes, conferences, and publications, engage in communication with and "irritate" other social systems. Knowles asks whether these tools enable sociologists to communicate sociological knowledge in ways that align with the humanistic goals the discipline sociology is pursuing, and concludes that sociologists might overcome an undeniable communicative inefficacy regarding its ambitious goals by taking seriously Luhmannian insights regarding communication and considering alternative forms of communication to reach new audiences.

The title of the second chapter in the third part, by Santiago Calise, is "Give Me an Operation and I Will Give You a System: The Psychic in Luhmann's Theory." The chapter explores, analyzes, and compares different solutions to a range of problems Luhmann identified over the course of his career, dividing them into two distinct periods. Regarding his pre-autopoietic writings, system/environment as inside/outside the system, and selectivity as the difference between process and system are at stake. During the autopoietic phase, the analysis focuses on operation and selection, medium and form, operation and observation, structural coupling and operational closure, and differentiation. This detailed chronological analysis of Luhmann's interpretation of the psychic element shows how he distinguished the personal aspect (a structural trait) from the operation of the system, presenting the problem of how to unify all the capacities of consciousness under one single operation. Distinguishing clearly between two main hypotheses and their shortcomings, the possibility of differentiation of consciousness is addressed.

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PART I

A PROGRAMMATIC INTRODUCTION REVISITED (AND UPDATED)

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SOCIAL THEORY'S BURDEN: FROM HETERONOMY TO *VITACIDE* (OR, HOW CLASSICAL CRITICAL THEORY PREDICTED PROLIFERATING RACKETS, AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITIES, AND ADMINISTERED WORLDS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY)

Harry F. Dahms

ABSTRACT

The burden social theorists must be willing to accept, respond to, and act upon pertains to the difficulties that predictably accompany all efforts to convey to nontheorists the unwelcome fact of heteronomy – that as actors, we are not as autonomous as we were told and prefer to assume – and to spell out what heteronomy in the form in which it has been shaping the developmental trajectory of modern societies means for professional theorists. I introduce the concept of “vitacide,” designed to capture that termination of life is a potential vanishing point of the heteronomous processes that have been shaping modern societies continuing to accelerate and intensify in ways that prefigure our future, but not on our human or social terms. Heteronomy pointing toward vitacide should compel us as social theorists to consider critically both the constructive and destructive trajectory that social change appears to have been following for more than two centuries, irrespective of whether the resulting prospect is to our liking or not. In this context, the classical critical theorists of

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the early Frankfurt School, especially Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, pursued what turned out to be an evolving interest in rackets, the authoritarian personality, and the administered society – concepts that served as foils for delineating the kind of theoretical stance that is becoming more and more important as we are moving into an increasingly uncertain future.

Keywords: Heteronomy; critical theory; Max Horkheimer; Theodor W. Adorno; Frankfurt School; neoliberalism

INTRODUCTION

In many regards, the situation we are confronting today is similar to the circumstances in which the young group of scholars who later would be associated with the critical theory of the so-called Frankfurt School – including Max Horkheimer, Friedrich Pollock, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin, Leo Lowenthal, and Theodor W. Adorno – were facing during the second half of the 1920s, as the rise of Italian fascism under Mussolini was a sign of things to come in their own country, and on the eve of the Great Depression, which would propel Hitler to power by legal democratic means in early 1933.

While the contention of similarities may seem to be overdrawn, it has become amply evident that in modern societies, myriad challenges of different kinds and scales are being managed with disappointing success and pushed down the road and into an increasingly uncertain future, in the absence of a clear understanding of the inherent (if not regressive) inertia of most strategies employed, and how they may be symptomatic of what we might refer to, for now and in a gross understatement, as “design flaws” at work in modern societies. In many ways, the notion that qualitative solutions that would be conducive to promoting what Adam Smith called the “general interest of society” might be attainable appears to have been abandoned by most decision-makers decades ago, undercut partly by the growing intensity of the pursuit of divergent economic and political interests by various segments of society. At the same time, the political and policy rhetoric of pursuing full-fledged solutions to an array of social political, economic, and environmental problems continues to be employed, as a matter of principle, even though the spectrum of political and policy goals and strategies largely has shrunk down in recent decades to the horizon of neoliberalism.

When these scholars, several of whom knew each other since their student years, began to meet in Frankfurt at or in the orbit of the Institute for Social Research, which had been founded in 1923 and opened in 1924 under the directorship of Austrian labor historian Carl Grünberg, they were amply aware of the inability of democratic governments to tackle most social and economic problems, at a time that was pregnant with new ideas, perspectives, and expectations regarding the future (Jay, 1973; Wiggershaus, 1986/1995). Yet they probably could not have imagined the horrors that would be unleashed a few years later, initially on segments of the population in Germany, and later, in the form of World War II, in many countries around the world, directly and

indirectly. Still, the 1920s as the first decade of the Weimar Republic – the first national experiment with democracy on German soil – were ripe with the promise and possibilities of accelerating social change toward qualitative social, political, and economic improvements, albeit combined with a hunch that the promise would not last, and most possibilities would not come to bear, and a related sense of foreboding.¹

The tensions between the purported successes of modern societies – such as democracy, the rule of law, the sanctity and autonomy of the individual, and more or less agreed-upon commitments to social justice and general welfare, and to alleviating structural inequalities that used to prevent entire segments of a given population from realizing their potential, or at least from trying to do so – and their apparent vulnerability to various political, economic, and technological trends, developments, and crises is as apparent today as it was then, in the United States and in many other countries. This vulnerability is especially evident regarding the increasing fragility of and weakening public support for democratic institutions, and their ability to defend themselves against increasingly well-organized and coordinated attacks not just from the far Right, but from the Right generally. Thus, one key similarity between the 1920s and the 2010s pertains to attitudes toward democracy. During the 1920s in Germany, a large segment of the population did not support democratic institutions and processes, and if given a choice, would have preferred a return of the monarchy. Presently, the strong (and institutionally) reinforced support in western Europe and North America for democracy after World War II has begun to wear thinner, as the generation of those who experienced the end of the war and the postwar era, especially the Cold War, have been passing away. As a result, attitudes toward democratic institutions and processes, such as elections, have been changing, in a variety of ways, even though it is difficult to assess the nature and extent of conflicting attitudes. In this context, what is coming to the fore in part are basic misconceptions linked to the tension between *republican* and *democratic* forms of governance that are often overlooked or intentionally ignored, as they pertain to corresponding and conflicting stances regarding the extent of the citizenry's involvement in large-scale decision-making processes; now as then, related divergences that have been bubbling for decades are coming to the surface.

From the vantage point of social theory – and in addition to the terrifying real-world implications – a looming or manifest crisis of democracy evidently, predictably, and inevitably will impact and impair, and presumably undercut, the efforts and work of social theorists to illuminate the conditions and workings of modern societies in many ways, not least because the informed democratic citizenry implicitly or explicitly, and typically, constitutes the implied, if more or less remote audience. The increasingly perilous circumstances that are presently unfolding not only have a bearing on what to study but also especially on how the practices and ethics of social theory are interconnected with democracy in myriad ways, as both a sort of microcosm of the ideas that inform and inspire and, when overstated for purposes of an argument – or intentionally overdrawn to trigger condemnation – disorient or frighten democratic citizens (and as the reference

frame social theorists have in mind when proposing new modes of analysis, paradigms, and strategies for solving social problems and confronting more or less material challenges). A manifest crisis and potential truncation or eclipse of democracy and its practices, culture, and processes most certainly would impact and likely transform both the larger context to reflect upon and capture in terms of the theory of modern society – in whose context social theory, as well as critical theory, emerged, attained relevance, and acquired distinctive purpose.

However, for present purposes, the current crisis of democracy is just one feature of today's circumstances, trends, and developments that invite comparison with those that prevailed when the classical critical theory started to take shape, and which provoked its formation, as the tradition I will focus on here, partly for purposes of illustration. *In many regards, we appear to be less than prepared to acknowledge and assess the potential magnitude of at least some of these trends, developments, and crises, as they must be traced to the very foundations of modern society, of which republican and democratic forms – and tensions between both – may be symptoms rather than causes, as we are facing an increasingly uncertain future.* It is for this reason that the determination of the members of the early Frankfurt School, as it came to be known decades later, and of the proponents of classical critical theory, including Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, and others, as has been noted in recent years, warrants yet another close look.

While many aspects of the early Frankfurt School have been examined, reconstructed, traced historically, and critically assessed at length and in great detail, the purpose here will not be to add along similar lines further historical detail to this literature, or yet another rendering of its history. Instead, the goal is to situate three aspects of the contributions of the early Frankfurt School that are especially important in terms of the (critical) social theory of modern society today, and which for related purposes have been largely neglected until very recently. These aspects pertain to what has turned out to be the parallel proliferation of *rackets*, *authoritarian personalities*, and *administered worlds* – in the plural; rather than merely denoting types, they appear to have been *coemerging* and taking on *multiple forms*, which makes their detection more complicated and more difficult. At the same time, acknowledging explicitly their convergence and intensification will enable us to accept what social theorists have endeavored to identify and visualize since the beginning of the modern age, as far as one – possibly the defining – aspect of the disconcerting nature of modern societies is concerned, *heteronomy*.² To name the latter, a requisite yet neglected theoretical terminology and concurrent conceptions also have become available in recent years, even though related ideations have been at our disposal since the nineteenth century – onerous though they are, unsettling with regard to our preferred perceptions of modern society and our place within it. The burden social theorists must be willing to accept, respond to, and act upon pertains to the difficulties that predictably accompany all efforts to convey to nontheorists the most unwelcome fact of heteronomy: that we are not anywhere near as autonomous as we are told and taught and supposed to believe. Therefore, it is imperative to spell and flesh out what heteronomy in the form in which it has been shaping the developmental

trajectory of modern societies means for each and every one of us, especially as far as the medium-to-long-term time horizon of this social formation is concerned. I will refer to the resulting prospect as “vitacide,” the termination of life – at least the life that we have become accustomed to and take for granted. In addition, admitting that the trend underlying modern social life and human existence – *heteronomy pointing toward vitacide* – ought to obligate and compel us as social theorists to illuminate the *de facto* trajectory that social change appears to have been following for more than two centuries, irrespective of whether the resulting prospect is to our liking or not. In fact, especially if it is not.

Many individuals have a strong desire to look behind the proverbial curtain of modern civilization – behind or underneath the surface appearances of everyday life in economy, politics, and culture. To some extent, this desire reflects the fact that the structure and operations of modern societies are supposed to be based on and support democratic principles, according to those societies’ oft-repeated, codified, and enshrined “self-descriptions” – i.e., per the assertions of most official representatives and decision-makers especially in politics, but also corporate and many other and organizations’ leaders.³ Yet, empirically speaking, modern societies could not exist, *the way they exist*, if they did in fact provide opportunities and encourage individuals to look “behind the curtain” and glean their simultaneously highly complex, contradictory, and contingent operations (see Dahms, 2005), nor would there be as much of a need for the social sciences in general, and for social theories (including *critical* social theories), in particular. Thus, inevitably and predictably, the lure and rapid proliferation of conspiracy theories appear to result both from the widespread desire to fulfill related needs – “to *know* the world we live in” – and the frustration produced as a consequence of not being in possession of the tools and mindset needed to adequately and effectively explain and understand the modern social world. Indeed, to a large extent, the need for the social sciences, and especially for sociology and (critical) social theories, is correlated directly with the fact that modern societies are fraught with multiple types and processes of *heteronomy*.

The Disconcerting Challenge of Heteronomy...

Since the nineteenth century, social theorists have been concerned with and making consistent efforts to grasp and *name* the forms and influence of different types of *nonhuman heteronomy* that have been shaping the modern world, without ever using the concept. In many ways, the notion of humans having the capacity to be and act as autonomous individuals, as it is foundational to both the Enlightenment and the modern age, appears to have been too strong to allow social theorists, and later also sociologists, to relativize this notion in light of the fact that humans are limited by the codes that characterize and circumscribe the reality of *modern* society – by capitalism and consumerism (“commodity fetishism”) in Marx, social facts and the collective conscience in Durkheim, and the Protestant ethic in Weber. The efforts of these theorists to advocate the need to recognize how heteronomous processes engendered, maintained, and cooperated with by humans systematically undercut meaningful individual autonomy

for the vast majority of humans, except within the very limited realm of personal choices that are preset by particular social environments – such as capital accumulation in Marx, differentiation (as well as moralization) in Durkheim, or rationalization in Weber, followed by theorists providing further analyses proving this point during the twentieth century – has been facing major resistance, on the part both of individuals and most social scientists; for most, it appears, accepting this condition simply would be too unsettling. Since the beginning of industrialization, heteronomous processes, materialized via human actions and choices, literally have been transforming the surface of the planet, the “face of the Earth,” and what it means to refer to ourselves as human and/or social beings. Nevertheless, “heteronomy” has rarely been employed in the social-theory, social-science, and philosophy literature, despite its conspicuous fit, and if so, only with regard to constellations between humans. Webster’s defines the term as follows,

het-ēr-on’ō-my, *n.* [*hetero-*, and Gr. *nomos*, law.]

- (1) The state of being subject to the law or authority of another; subordination to authority from without: opposed to *autonomy*.
- (2) In Kantian philosophy, subjection to the laws or restrictions imposed on man by nature or by his appetites, passions, and desires, and not by reason.⁴

What is noteworthy about this definition, which in intriguing and usually neglected fashion jives most of the instances in which the term has been used in the social-theory literature, is that it easily is applied to the kinds of issues professional theorists have been trying to elucidate. “[T]he state of being subject to the law or authority of another” usually refers to another *human* or *group of humans* endowed with power and/or influence that enables them to exert control over certain groups or categories of individuals (e.g., within the legal system, the economic system, or a formal hierarchy or bureaucracy), and in social theory is related to the issue of domination. However, from a social-theory standpoint, “the state of being subject to the law or authority of” *other* is both distinctly more intriguing and more productive, as far as illuminating key aspects of the individual-modern society link is concerned. After all, this is what both many classical and contemporary social and critical theorists have been trying to illuminate and convey: modern societies change according to forces that cannot be observed directly, but only inferred through their visible and material manifestations. What can be accessed and assessed are the surface appearances of an underlying logic that creates, as it were, a reality after its own taste or, to be more rigorous, a reality that is consonant with the specific value a particular aspect of the *constitutional logic of modern society* was initially charged by living humans with creating and regenerating. Such “values” included economic prosperity (e.g., through markets and the production and distribution of commodities), labor efficiency (e.g., through corporate control and scientific management), or bureaucratic predictability and reliability (e.g., through a formal hierarchical structure, management by rules, functional specialty, etc.), whose related social