

# Critique of the Notion of Critique

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## 3) The modern, autonomous notion of critique

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In order to work on a "Critical theory of the subject in the 20th century", one is first of all forced to outline at least cautiously heuristic notions of "critical theory" and of "subjectivity". In this opening lecture, I'd like to focus attention on the notion of "critique". It will become obvious very quickly however, that the notion of critique and the notion of subject have referred to and actually depended on each other at least since the 18th century.

The title "Critique of the Notion of Critique" relates to the content of my lecture in the same heuristically-circular way, this lecture relates to our symposium. The title takes for granted, what the lecture itself is meant to bring forth: one or even two notions of critique. And precisely here lies the problem: The title of this lecture confronts two notions of critique with each other. Whereas the first of the two seems to be sure about the criteria for its critique, the second, as it were, loses its self-confidence under the searching look of the first.

As for the first of the two notions, which is meant to serve as a methodological guideline for the following, I'd like to say only this much here: The title "Critique of the notion of critique" of course alludes to the three Kantian critiques, the third of which – the Critique of judgement written in 1790 – actually is a critique of a particular notion of critique already. Here, critique as a method generally means the examination of the range and limits of human cognitive faculties, of methodological paradigms or even of regulative notions such as that of critique itself.

Now, the eminent thing about a "Critique of the notion of critique" is, that the first part of the title promises to analyse and argue logically exact, from a point of view more or less above history and, as it were, independently from any value judgement whatsoever. The object of this analysis, on the other hand, which is being given by the second part of the title, has been defined very differently over the centuries. To make things more complicated, these definitions were heavily charged with normative concepts more often than not. Whether or not a methodological application like this can be successful in a scientifically decent way is doubtful. Max Weber however believes it's possible:

„die wissenschaftliche Behandlung der Werturteile möchte nun die gewollten Zwecke und die ihnen zugrunde liegenden Ideale nicht nur verstehen und nacherleben lassen, sondern vor allem auch kritisch beurteilen lehren. Diese Kritik [...] kann verhelfen zur Selbstbesinnung auf die letzten Wertmaßstäbe, von denen der Wollende unbewußt ausgeht oder - um konsequent zu sein - ausgehen müßte.“ (Max Weber, „Die ‚Objektivität‘ sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis“, 1904, 151)

"the scientific analysis of value judgements not only wants to allow for an understanding and reliving of their intended purposes, but is also intended to teach their critical examination. This critique ... can help to remind one of the very final standards of value, which the critic does or – to be consequent – should take as the starting point."

After all, the possibility of humanities on the whole depends on the possibility to examine value judgements independently of value judgements.

## **1) The pre-modern, pre-autonomous notion of critique**

It took quite a while for the notion of critique, that has been developed in the course of the 18th and 19th century and that is possibly dissolving right now, to unite with the actual word critique. As the Historical Dictionary of Philosophy tells us, in antiquity the term *kritiké téchne* described the art of differentiating, rating and judging, and thus, in Kantian terms, the power of judgement, which, in the widest sense, both determines and reflects. This encompasses both the capacity for 'simple' sensual differentiation in order to find ones bearings in the natural world, and the capacity to orient oneself in the social and cultural world through the ethical-political or judicial subsumption of concrete human action and behaviour under general rules and laws. In the course of this subsumption, these positive norms can themselves be indirectly subjected to scrutiny with regard to their truth and quality.

To subject norms to such a close scrutiny, however, doesn't necessarily imply doubts about the general possibility of universal norms for human practice. Socrates, Cato, Jesus or Luther (and in some ways even Marx) didn't conceptualise their critique of consciousness as a destruction of norms or as revolutionary innovation, but rather claimed merely to fulfil the intentions of the old norms better than their contemporaries. Claus von Bormann characterises this pre-modern, pre-autonomous notion of critique as follows:

„Auch wenn Normen selbst kritisiert werden, geben immer wieder höhere Normen die Kriterien ab. Insofern ist Kritik immer nur funktional und instrumental verstanden. [...] eine solche Kritik kann nie das Ganze der

Praxis in den Blick bekommen. Der ethisch Handelnde kann nie ganz aus seiner eigenen Praxis heraustreten, um sie in die Prüfung der Reflexion einzuholen.“ (Claus von Bormann, Art. „Kritik“, 1973, 810/813)

"Even if norms are subjected to critique, it's always higher norms that provide the criteria for that critique. Critique thus is only ever understood functionally and instrumentally. (...) such a critique is ill suited to cover the whole of practice. The ethical agent is unable to fully step out of her own practice in order to include it into the examination of reflection." (Claus von Bormann, Art. "Kritik", 1973, 810/813)

This pre-modern notion of critique thus never questions the existence of a final criterion of critique, of a top level in the hierarchy of values, even if it concedes that it's possible to have fundamental differences about the interpretation of this criterion. It therefore appears to be possible to bring critique, in the double sense of a methodical procedure and a questioning of norms, to a closure in a final judgement. Critique is not yet an open-ended process.

This, however, is a feature the pre-modern notion of critique shares with the etymologically related term "crisis", which originally refers to the singular decisive moment within a process (e.g. the moment when an illness comes to a critical head), that brings the process to either a good or a bad end. (see Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise*, 1959)

The general possibility to finish the business of critique in the pre-modern sense is well illustrated by two spheres of critique, which, from early on, were occupied by the term itself: textual criticism/critique and criticism/critique of poetry and art. The philological criticism of corrupt or doubtfully handed down texts is usually well justified in presuming the existence of an authentic original version, even if refined discussions about the actual form of this original persist. On the other hand, pre-modern literary criticism still believes it has classically-timeless criteria at its disposal, that allow for definitive judgements of works of art.

In the modern age, the semantic content of the notion of critique, that was borrowed from antiquity, doesn't change fundamentally yet. Even the expansion of textual criticism to the Scriptures remains within denominational boundaries for the time being. It's only Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* that takes the final plunge towards a practically oriented notion of critique in 1697. His textual criticism is interdenominational and critical of religion in the sense of a strict separation of religion and science. The 2nd edition of his *Dictionnaire* is already quite frank about this:

"Il faut nécessairement opter entre la philosophie et l'Évangile [...]: la combinaison de ces deux choses n'est guère plus impossible que la combinaison des commodités de la figure carrée et de la figure ronde." (Pierre Bayle, *Ille Eclaircissement joint à la seconde éd. [1701] du Dictionnaire historique et critique* [1697], ed. A.J. Beuchot, Paris 1820-1824, vol 15, 317)

"One is forced to choose between the sciences ('philosophie' in french enlightenment thought is best translated as 'sciences' or 'scholarliness') and the Gospel: it's as hard to combine the two, as it is to combine the advantages of circle with those of a rectangle."

The more emphatic the emancipated notions of science and reason get, the more polemic becomes the demarcation towards religion. Thus, the foundations for an expansion of the notion of critique into all spheres of practice are already laid indirectly. The moment, when the classic enlightenment notion of critique turns into political subversion is best captured in Jean-François Marmontel's article on "critique" for Diderot's und d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, written in 1794. The article unsuspectingly starts out with remarks on textual criticism, criticism of science and art criticism, only to abruptly turn into political propaganda in the paragraphs on "critique en Morale"/"critique of morals".

"l'Histoire, dans sa partie morale, est une espèce de labyrinthe où l'opinion du lecteur ne cesse de s'égarer; c'est un guide qui lui manque : or ce guide seroit un *critique* capable de distinguer le droit de l'autorité et la vertu de la gloire; en un mot de réduire l'homme quel qu'il fût à la condition de *citoyen*; condition qui est la base des lois, la règle des mœurs, & dont aucun homme en société n'eut jamais droit de s'affranchir. Le critique [...] ne doit voir la société en général que comme un arbre immense dont chaque homme est un rameau, chaque république une branche, & dont l'humanité est le tronc. De-là le droit particulier & le droit public, qui ne sont l'un & l'autre que le droit naturel plus ou moins étendu, mais soumis aux mêmes principes invariables de l'équité naturelle." (Jean-François Marmontel, Art. "Critique", s.f., *Encyclopédie* etc., 1754, 494; my emphasis)

„from a moral point of view history or historiography represent some sort of a labyrinth in which the reader gets lost continuously; he's missing a guide. This guide could be a critic, who would be able to distinguish between justice and authority, between virtue and glory; a guide in other words, who'd return man back to his capacity of „citoyen“: a capacity, that is the foundation of law and custom, a capacity that no man in society is ever allowed to shed. The critic is required to conceptualise the whole of society as a giant tree: each man is a twig, each republic a branch and humanity at large represents the trunk. From this conception follow both civil and public law, which are mere extended versions of natural law, but are subjected to the same unchanging principles of natural justice.“ (my emphasis)

Thinly veiled, critique here means a critique of the current social and political situation in France. Rousseau's 'citoyen', one of the central terms in the battle against social inequality and for political commitment, is here elevated to an epitome of all things humane. Justice and virtue are polemically pitted against inherited authority and aristocratic "gloire" and the republic is declared the only form of government legitimised by natural law.

At the height of its self-confidence, classic enlightenment derives political imperatives from its own theses about the nature of man, political imperatives that will serve as central themes in the 1789 revolution. Marmontel however doesn't realise how shaky the principles, from which he derives his self-confidence and his certitude about the future, have already become. A glance at the social theory and philosophy of history of Marmontel's source Rousseau shall now demonstrate

the epistemological basis of this classic enlightenment notion of critique.

## 2) The crumbling of the pre-autonomous notion of critique in the process of the emergence and discovery of modern subjectivity

The classic enlightenment notion of critique derives its political and practical self-confidence from the certainty about its highest criterion: the rational nature of man. As far as that goes, this notion of critique and the corresponding notion of subjectivity can be labelled pre-autonomous: Just as any concrete criticism has to be based on the criterion of the timeless rational nature of man, each concrete individual has always already found its centre of identity with this rational nature.

Now, on the one hand, this pre-autonomous, naive notion of critique with its supposed certainty about its criteria is widely recognised as politically and practically valid up to the present day. Its pre-autonomous character is actually emphasised by the fact, that this originally oppositional notion rose, in the wake of the revolutions and world wars since 1789, to become an instrument of governance. An instrument that is no longer only used to criticise power, but which also serves as a weapon against those who doubt the natural and rational character of the ruling tendencies in being and consciousness. On the other hand, the basis of this pre-autonomous, classical enlightenment notion of critique – the concept of the universal rational nature of man – already started to crumble at the very height of classical enlightenment itself, around 1750. And of all people it was Rousseau himself, the prime source not only for Marmontel but for the whole critical-revolutionary theory of enlightenment at large, who disclosed the rational, natural law basis of the classical enlightenment notion of critique as an illusive projection.

(The following is based on my own research published in *Die Entdeckung des modernen Subjekts/The discovery of the modern subject*, 1997)

A year after Marmontel's article on "critique" appeared, Rousseau published his *Discours sur l'inégalité*, which destroyed the epistemological basis of Marmontel's notion of critique. Rousseau's point of departure is a thorough criticism of the method of natural law proponents like Hobbes and Locke. In order to dissect the nature of man, they had, in an experiment of thought, simply stripped their contemporaries of their entire social infrastructure and declared the effects of the disappearance of all governmental law enforcement agencies to represent the natural state of man. What resulted from this experiment, depending of course on the respective point of view, was a more or less passionate nature of man, who, at the same time, was equipped with the ability to understand that the best way to avoid permanent civil war was to invent the same governmental law enforcement agencies, that the very experiment of thought had stripped them of temporarily. Rousseau disclosed the most important error in the construction of this natural law concept:

"Les Philosophes qui ont examiné les fondemens de la société, ont tous senti la nécessité de remonter jusqu'à l'état de Nature, mais aucun d'eux n'y est arrivé. [...] tous ont transporté à l'état de Nature des idées qu'ils avoient prises dans la société; ils parloient de l'homme sauvage, et ils peignoient l'homme Civil" (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'inégalité*, 1755, 68).

„The philosophers, who have inquired into the foundations of society, have all felt the necessity of going back to a state of nature; but not one of them has got there...Every one of them, in short...has transferred to the state of nature ideas which were acquired in society; so that, in speaking of the savage, they described the social man."

The natural law proponents of the modern age had quite simply analytically extrapolated the "natural state" of man from behavioural patterns of their contemporaries. Rousseau understood, that all too many of these patterns had only evolved in the process of civilisation. So, if we are to speculatively rewind this process, we also have to do it for the process of the development of human consciousness. And we already foresee where this is going to end:

"Les seuls biens que l'homme naturel connoisse dans l'Univers, sont la nourriture, une femelle et le repos. Il avoit dans le seul instinct tout ce qu'il lui falloit pour vivre dans l'état de Nature [...]. Les hommes naturels ne connoissoient ni la vanité, ni la considération, ni l'estime, ni le mépris; ils n'avoient pas la moindre notion du tien et du mien, ni aucune véritable idée de la justice" (ibid., 134/152).

"The only goods he recognises in the universe are food, a female, and sleep...In instinct alone, he had all he required for living in the state of nature...They... were ...strangers to vanity, deference, esteem and contempt; they had not the least idea of meum and tuum, and no true conception of justice."

At the beginnings of man Rousseau finds the ape. Thus he breaks the central taboo of classical anthropology: the separation of man as a species from animals. This dogma had also been the most important driving force of all metaphysical thought. It's actually possible to define metaphysics as an attempt to explain man's nature as timelessly self-identical and radically different from the nature of animal. In other words, metaphysics were about dissolving history in timelessness. In Rousseau, the nature of man for the first time discloses its time kernel. Instead of dissolving the historicity of man in the classical notion of nature, Rousseau dissolves the nature of man in the historical process:

"Le Genre-humain d'un âge n'est pas le Genre-humain d'un autre âge ; [...] l'ame et les passions humaines changent pour ainsi dire de Nature" (p. 264).

„Mankind in one age is unlike mankind in another age;...soul and emotionality of man, change, so to speak, their nature."

"Changer de Nature"/"Change their nature" is a nonsensical statement in classical thought. This scandalous confusion of ideas is further emphasised by Rousseau by adding the "pour ainsi dire"/"so to speak". But if the nature of man is dissolved in a process, at the beginning of which we find the non-human, the animal, then of course the end has surely to be open too. In classical thought the telos is contained in origin. If the certitude about the origin is lost, then orientation is lost with it. Man is a coincidence:

"...la perfectibilité, les vertus sociales, et les autres facultés, que l'homme Naturel avoit reçues en puissance ne pouvoient jamais se développer d'elles mêmes, [...] elles avoient besoin pour cela du concours fortuit de plusieurs causes étrangères qui pouvoient ne jamais naître, et sans lesquelles il fut demeuré éternellement dans sa condition primitive." (p 166).

"...human perfectibility, the social virtues, and the other faculties which natural man potentially possessed, could never develop of themselves...but must require the fortuitous concurrence of many foreign causes that might never arise, and without which he would have remained for ever in his primitive condition."

Not a single one of the features, that distinguish man from animal, not even his perfectibility or his higher potential for development, came into being by necessity. Of course, the potential for anthropogenesis had to be there, since it eventually was realised – therefore Rousseau speaks of "faculté en puissance". But there surely were many other potentials, that happened not to be realised in the course of history – therefore even anthropogenesis itself might as well not have happened at all. It's no longer possible for metaphysical thought to push aside what is by now all too obvious: the radically contingent nature of man; 'contingent' in the sense of something that does exist, but might as well exist in another form or not at all. And what is true about the whole species, of course applies to each single individual as well; or rather: After the disintegration of the term human nature it's strictly speaking no longer possible to use the term 'species'. From now on each individual is its own species. But even this logical construct doesn't really work. A logical species would at least be identical with itself. It's impossible however, to make that claim for the modern subject.

Thus, human nature is an open-ended process, that began ex-nihilo with non-man. But how do we derive norms for human behaviour and interaction, and with it criteria for criticism, from a process? Is this possible at all? Being the first cultural critic in the modern sense, Rousseau surely intended that his *Discours sur l'inégalité* be a harsh critique of social inequality and the absolutist corporative state. His interest for earlier forms of civilisation surely derives from the fact that their social fabric was less differentiated. In the course of his treatise however, Rousseau is forced to recognise, to his own surprise, that it is impossible, in an open process, to derive norms from its predecessors for interaction in a given society.

In his *Discours sur l'inégalité* Rousseau speculatively outlines a historical phenomenology of forms of consciousness from pre-man up to the present. As the main driving force of this process he identifies the growing differentiation between individual and collective consciousness. In the beginning, with less differentiated forms of consciousness and societal fabric, the individual sense of identity mainly derives from the community. Since the individual consciousness has not yet emancipated itself thoroughly enough from the collective consciousness, public and private interest don't clash seriously yet at this stage. But it's precisely this antagonism, that erupts and deepens as an effect of the process of societal differentiation.

"C'est à cette ardeur de faire parler de soi, à cette fureur de se distinguer qui nous tient presque toujours hors de nous mêmes, que nous devons ce qu'il ya de meilleur et de pire parmi les hommes, nos vertus et nos vices, nos Sciences et nos erreurs, nos Conquérans et nos Philosophes." (p. 256).

"It's this glowing ardour to make oneself a name, this furor to distinguish oneself, that we owe the best and the worst in man to: Our virtues and vices, our sciences and our errors, our conquerors and our philosophers."

The differentiation of the subject from the community expresses itself in some sort of a personality split. The more autonomous subject is incapable of stabilising its identity out of itself. It remains dependent upon the voluntary acceptance of its singularity by other individuals and is therefore in much greater danger of 'being beside itself' than the pre-autonomous subject. For Rousseau, the antagonism of this fragile inter-subjective dynamic represents the main driving force of historical development. Categories like progress or regress are ill-suited to capture the essence of this process: we owe "the best and the worst", as Rousseau says, to this "fureur de se distinguer". It would be as pointless to criticise fundamental tendencies of historical development post factum. Thus Rousseau concludes his treatise with a surprising result:

"Il suit de cet exposé que l'inégalité étant presque nulle dans l'état de Nature, tire sa force et son accroissement du développement de nos facultés et des progrès de l'Esprit humain, et devient enfin stable et légitime par l'établissement de la propriété et des Loix" (p. 270).

"It follows, that inequality, which is nil in the natural state, derives its power and its growth from the development of our faculties and from the progress of human spirit. As a result of the establishment of property and laws it eventually becomes stable and legitimate."

In the course of the treatise, the notion of "inégalité" changed its semantic content. Its original sociocritical intention was neutralised in favour of a newly acquired dimension of an analysis of consciousness. The term now encompasses both the process of individuation and the process of estrangement of the individual consciousness from the community and from itself. The autonomous subject is constituted in a complex dialectic of equality and inequality. Rousseau goes on to show in detail, how mediating instances such as language, work, positive law, property and power support the constitution of the autonomous subject as well as qualify it. Rousseau is aware of the danger of complete loss of self in a total network of relations and mediation:

"L'homme originel s'évanouissant par degrés, la Société n'offre plus aux yeux du sage qu'un assemblage d'hommes artificiels et de passions factices qui sont l'ouvrage de toutes ces nouvelles relations, et n'ont aucun vrai fondement dans la Nature." (p.266).

„The original man step by step disappears, and society, to the eye of the wise man, is nothing but an accumulation of artificial man and affected emotions, which are the product of all the new relations and have no real foundation in nature whatsoever."

Since Rousseau, in his *Discours sur l'inégalité*, has personally destroyed the very notion of nature, which he invokes towards the end of this passage, he is now of course unable to name criteria for his criticism. Also, the future of the development of man remains open and unpredictable for Rousseau. Teetering between tendencies of total *Vermachtung* of the by now kernel-less subjects and attempts of resistance, Rousseau depicts the future of mankind as a permanent crisis:

"Nous approchons de l'état de crise et du siècle des révolutions," (*Emile*, 1762, 224),

"We approach a state of crisis and an age of revolutions",

writes Rousseau 1762 in *Emile*. As Reinhart Koselleck explains, Rousseau is the first to give a new interpretation to the term 'crisis': by now crisis means a state of permanent structural transformation. In such a process of crisis, it's of course no longer possible to give generally binding criteria for criticism, therefore it's also impossible to have a generally binding image of man. The process, as it were, carries along the individual kernel-less subjects. Other subjects like Rousseau, who attempt resistance, create the criteria of their criticism decisionistically out of themselves. Rousseau's autobiography begins like this:

"Je ne suis fait comme aucun de ceux que j'ai vus; j'ose croire n'être fait comme aucun de ceux qui existent. Si je ne vaux pas mieux, au moins je suis autre." (*Les Confessions*, 1765-70, 3)

„I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality"

His subjective singularity is one of the two ethical criteria, which Rousseau still allows for; the only judge Rousseau accepts for himself is himself:

"Que la trompette du jugement dernier sonne quand elle voudra; je viendrai ce livre [*Les Confessions*] à la main me présenter devant le souverain juge. Je dirai hautement: voilà ce que j'ai fait, ce que j'ai pensé, ce que je fus. [...] Etre éternel, rassemble autour de moi l'innombrable foule de mes semblables: qu'ils écoutent mes confessions. [...] Que chacun d'eux découvre à son tour son cœur avec la même sincérité; et puis, qu'un seul te dise, s'il l'ose: je fus meilleur que cet homme-là" (*ibid.*).

"I will present myself, whenever the last trumpet shall sound, before the Sovereign Judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, "Thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I. ... Power Eternal! assemble round Thy throne an innumerable throng of my fellow-mortals, let them listen to my confessions, let them blush at my depravity, let them tremble at my sufferings; let each in his turn expose with equal sincerity the failings, the wanderings of his heart, and if he dare, aver, I was better than that man."

Rousseau turns the Last Judgement into a performance of Jean Jacques, who prefers to provide our dear God with his very own Book of life in the form of the *Confessions*. Unconditional sincerity towards himself as his very own judge becomes the second ethical criterion apart from the subjective singularity. Considering that "Last Judgement" is also "crisis" in the Greek New Testament, the changed meaning of the terms crisis and critique becomes obvious once again. Mankind no longer appears before the seat of universal truth and grace in order to hear the final judgement and the final critique. Instead some dwell unconsciously and without any sense of purpose or direction, whereas others write their own judgements and present them to their fellow people for an open-ended process of comparison.

### 3) The modern, autonomous notion of critique

German theory from Kant to Marx draws its conclusions from Rousseau's destruction of the binding natural law criterion for critique. After losing all timelessly-binding value criteria for critique and for authentic subjectivity, critique becomes bottomless and autonomous at the same time. Following Koselleck, critique in the modern age turns into *hypo-critique* or *hypo-crisis*, because it has to either veil or suppress its bottomlessness in order still to be effectual. If critique in the modern age accepts the loss of a priori value criteria, then it is forced autonomously to set its criteria in the course of the process of critique itself. In this situation, critical theory has two options: it either withdraws from practice and turns transcendental – as with Kant –, or it turns into instrument of political struggle – as with Marx.

Immanuel Kant points out, that the individual consciousness cannot find any criterion for authenticity in the super-individual rational principle of "cogito". In his *Critique of pure reason* he writes:

"Daß aber Ich, der ich denke, im Denken immer als Subjekt gelten müsse, bedeutet nicht, daß ich, als Objekt, ein, für mich, selbst bestehendes Wesen, oder Substanz sei, [...] kann also auch nicht die Identität der Person bedeuten" (Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781/87, B 407s.)

"That the 'I', the 'I' that thinks, can be regarded always as subject... but it does not mean that I, as object, am for myself a self- subsistent being or substance. ...and cannot therefore signify the identity of the person."

Kant declares total contingency to be a fundamental precondition for the existence of modern subjectivity:

"...die empirische Einheit des Bewußtseins, durch Assoziation der Vorstellungen, ist ganz zufällig." (ibd., B 139s.)

"...the empirical unity of consciousness, through association of representations...is wholly contingent."

If criticism wants to be scientifically-objective under such conditions, it can but be self-criticism of reason and its dogmatic arrogance. As the examples of the Romantic criticism of reason, of the Dialectics of Enlightenment and of deconstruction prove, this type of transcendental criticism of reason can still have a practical impact in an indirect and negative way. But it is clearly forced to refrain from any attempt to postulate positive criteria for practical criticism.

In his practical philosophy and his aesthetics, Kant does not yet face this conclusion directly. But soon enough it will become obvious, that his Categorical Imperative is not feasible given the complexity of modern societies and consciousness, and that the instance in consciousness that it appeals to is far too unreliable. The aporias of Kant's practical philosophy are unveiled indirectly, when he completes the three basic questions of reason from his Critique of pure reason

"1. Was kann ich wissen? 2. Was soll ich tun? 3. Was darf ich hoffen?" (ibd., B 833)

"1. What can I know? 2. What am I to do? 3. What may I hope?"

with the fourth and most fundamental question of them all:

"4. Was ist der Mensch?" (Kant, Vorlesungen, Jäsche 1800, 25),

"4. What is man?"

and he adds that the answers to the first three questions depend on the answer to the last. If man, however, is an open-ended process, as we know since Rousseau, and if the human individual is irreducible to the species, then of course universal, timeless anthropological constants like the Categorical Imperative do not apply anyway.

Hegel's philosophy of history does conceptualise human consciousness as a process, but for Hegel this is a rationally directed, finishable or indeed already finished process. This concept was disclosed as an illusion between 1815 and 1848, when Marx set out to write a new chapter in the phenomenology of forms of human consciousness. Hegel had taught Marx to look for elements of rationality in the contradictory tendencies of the historical process itself. Marx however didn't share Hegel's confidence that reason would eventually be realised in history of itself. In order to reach that goal, man, according to Marx, has to take a central part in intellectual and political conflicts. However, for Marx, practice itself has to already contain at least some traces of rationality in order to provide critical and engaged thought with a starting point:

"Es genügt nicht, daß der Gedanke zur Verwirklichung drängt, die Wirklichkeit muß sich selbst zum Gedanken drängen." (Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*, 1844, „Einleitung“, 386)

„It is not enough for thought to strive for realisation, reality must itself strive towards thought.“

During the second half of the 19th century, in western and central Europe there indeed seemed to be a self-contradictory constellation of being and consciousness, that contained tendencies for a positive alteration of practice and which was thus able to provide a social critic of consciousness with criteria for a critical theory. On the one hand bourgeois ideology propagated humanistic ideals that could be redirected, in a criticism of its reality, at capitalism itself. On the other hand there was a potentially revolutionary class that began actively to demand these very humanistic ideals for itself. Thirdly, there was a class of intellectuals and artists who mediated between bourgeois ideology and the proletariat and who demonstrated their commitment in their art and theory.

Max Horkheimer's programmatic treatise "Traditional and critical theory", written in 1937, still echoes these humanistic ideals from the height of bourgeois ideology. His treatise derives its rhythm, as it were, from the continuous use of terms like

„Humanität“, „Freiheit“, „Gerechtigkeit“, „Solidarität“, „Autonomie“, „Selbstbestimmung“, „Emanzipation“, „das Glück aller Individuen“, „die Versöhnung von Individuum und Gesellschaft“, „ein harmonisches kulturelles Ganzes“, „die Gemeinschaft freier Menschen“, (Max Horkheimer, „Traditionelle und kritische Theorie“, 1937, passim)

"humanity", "freedom", "justice", "solidarity", "autonomy", "self-determination", "emancipation", "the happiness of all people", "the reconciliation of individual and society", "a harmonic cultural whole", "the community of free man".

Horkheimer even uses seemingly antiquated terms like:

„Aufrichtigkeit“, „Lauterkeit“, „Treue“ (ibd.)  
"sincerity", "integrity" and "faithfulness"

The towering position in this universe of values is still occupied by the term:

"Vernunft" (ibid.)  
"reason"

Once again Horkheimer:

„Das Ziel einer vernünftigen Gesellschaft, das heute freilich nur in der Phantasie aufgehoben scheint, ist in jedem Menschen wirklich angelegt“ (ibid., „Nachtrag“, 224)

"The goal of a rational society, that today only seems to have a place in imagination, truly resides in every man."

If the adjective "rational" is meant to sum up all the humanistic ideals that Horkheimer listed before, then this passage is a mistake and indeed an idealistic relapse that ignores Marx and even Rousseau. Towards the end of his Nachtrag (supplement) Horkheimer, however, strikes more realistic notes:

„Wenn die Persönlichkeit nach Goethe als Glück gilt, so hat Pirandello eben erst hinzugefügt, daß auch ihr Besitz sozial gestiftet ist und jederzeit verloren gehen kann“ (ibid., 225)

"If, according to Goethe, personality is luck, then Pirandello has just added, that to possess a personality is a product of social life only, a product, that can be lost at any moment." (ibid., 225)

One is tempted to specify that Goethe's notion of personality is not only at risk of being lost "at any moment", but also "forever". Consciousness, and its being, have changed so radically between Goethe and Pirandello, that man's reality, in Marxian terminology, is no longer striving towards the thought of Goethe's personality. It's impossible, however, to force a thought upon reality that doesn't refer to a reasonably tangible tendency in this reality.

After Marx, Freud, Sartre and Adorno write new chapters in the phenomenology of forms of human consciousness. Adorno in particular finds himself compelled to state the transitory nature of the possibility of a criticism of ideology and thus of criticism in the Marxian tradition:

„Mit der Gesellschaft ist die Ideologie derart fortgeschritten, daß sie nicht mehr zur wie immer brüchigen Selbständigkeit sich ausbildet, sondern nur noch als Kitt: falsche Identität von Subjekt und Objekt. Die Individuen sprechen auf die herrschende abstrakte Allgemeinheit an, als wäre sie ihre eigene Sache. Umgekehrt ist das Allgemeine, dem sie sich beugen, ohne es noch zu spüren, derart auf sie zugeschnitten [...], daß sie sich frei und leicht und freudig binden.“ (Theodor Adorno: Negative Dialektik, 1966, 341)

"Together with society ideology advanced to such an extent, that it no longer develops a however fragile autonomy, but merely serves as cement: wrong identity of subject and object. Individuals react to the ruling abstract generality, as if it was their own. Conversely, the general that they yield to without even noticing it, is tailored for them so much...that they commit themselves freely, easily and happily."

In the post-bourgeois and post-proletarian age, ideology loses its idealistic and therefore potentially critical superstratum. Ideology now means that the interests, power structures and role plays of social life infiltrate consciousness in such a subtle way, that the individual consciousness becomes identical with them. In fact, subjects who seem to benefit from the ruling social circumstances and those who don't, tend to turn back into unconscious, if not necessarily unhappy functionaries of the circumstances they live in. Or, to put it concisely and in the sense intended by Adorno, (who is, unfortunately, rarely concise):

Ideology is, when the consciousness reflects (in the sense of "mirrors") its being unreflectedly (in the sense of "uncritically").

This notion of ideology however is self-destructive, because the notion of ideology in the Marxian tradition instrumentalizes contrafactual ideals for its own purposes, that may turn into criteria of a critique of ideological consciousness and its being. The post-modern consciousness is neither ideological nor critical, it simply becomes identical with its being. The post-modern consciousness turns the Structural Transformation of the public sphere (Habermas) that created, and continuously deepens, the gap between inner life and the public sphere, between being and consciousness. Continuing Hegel's succession of forms of consciousness, one could supplement the stoical, the sceptical, the unhappy and the torn consciousness with the happily-one-dimensional consciousness of the post-modern age. To criticise this consciousness is increasingly considered to evince a retrograde attitude of refusal towards existing tendencies in being and consciousness and therefore is regarded as unfounded. Critique is thus losing the politically engaged character, it possessed as long as it could refer to certain tendencies in being and consciousness and fight for them and against others. As pure proposition, without roots in reality, the current notion of critique reaches its highest degree of autonomy. At the same time it turns back into an utopia. This notion of critique is exemplified by the later works of Michel Foucault. In treatises and lectures such as "Qu'est-ce que la critique", "Le sujet et le pouvoir" und "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières" Foucault is looking for his modernist and existentialist roots:

"La critique aurait essentiellement pour fonction le désassujettissement" (Michel Foucault, « Qu'est-ce que la critique », 1978, 39)

The wordplay in "désassujettissement" is intranslatable, because the word on the one hand declares critique of power (literally "dis-subjection") to be the prime function of critique. On the other hand it also postulates the liberation of the individual consciousness from a fixed identity. Thirdly, we have to remember that the word "sujet" as a philosophical category was imported very late from German into French and never quite lost the strain of its original meaning

"subject/Untertan". In his essay "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières" Foucault refers to Baudelaire's term "modernité" in order to illustrate a subject that is relatively independent from governance or self-inflicted delimitations, a subject that Foucault then prefers to call "sujet autonome". In the final passage of his essay, in which he outlines the project of a critical ontology of the modern subject, Foucault carries on where Sartre had left off:

L'ontologie critique de nous-mêmes, [...], il faut la concevoir comme une attitude, un éthos, une vie philosophique où la critique de ce que nous sommes est à la fois analyse historique des limites qui nous sont posées et épreuve de leur franchissement possible. [...] le travail critique nécessite, je pense, toujours le travail sur nos limites, c'est-à-dire un labeur patient qui donne forme à l'impatience de la liberté. » (Michel Foucault, « Qu'est-ce que les Lumières », 1984, Schluß)

"The critical ontology of ourselves ... has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.... I continue to think that this task requires work on our limits, that is, a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty."

Foucault's notions of "franchissement de ses limites/go beyond our limits" und des „travail sur ses limites/work on our limits" are reminiscent of Sartre's notion of self-transcendence and invoke the whole modern tradition of criticism of estrangement and inauthenticity in art and literature as well as in the critical theories. At the same time there is an air of nostalgic farewell to these notions of subject and criticism. The historical possibility of their realisation, if there ever was such a thing, might be over forever and with it the compensatory realisation in the imaginary realm of art might not be successful anymore. The post-modern consciousness steps so radically across the borders of modern, bourgeois subjectivity, that every notion of critique simply bounces off it.

#### **4) What could a "Critical theory of the subject in the 20th century" accomplish?**

The transcendental notion of critique appears to be less affected from the outlined crisis of the modern notion of critique than the practically-committed one. Therefore a positivist minimum goal of our symposium would consist in a critical assessment of forms and concepts of human subjectivity in the 20th century, as they appear through the filter of literature, art and the sciences. In a Kantian sense a critique of the dogmatic arrogance of high-handed concepts of subjectivity and criticism would certainly be part of this assessment – keeping in mind, that the advanced art, literature and theory of the modern age since the Romantic movement has itself already performed this critique.

It remains questionable, however, whether there can be an objective point of view, from which different forms of subjectivity can be compared. An objective point of view, from which different forms of subjectivity can be subjected to value judgements certainly doesn't exist anymore. What a Critical Theory can still strive for today is, following Max Weber's statement from the beginning of this talk, to work out standards of value, by which human subjects are placed outside themselves in their deeds and language acts. Finally, this symposium is about different images of man, about value loaded concepts of human life and interaction. Only when we are aware of the alternatives, does it become possible to take a stand, only then opportunities to choose and decide might arise. In this sense Jean Paul Sartre might still be right, when he says:

"Dévoiler c'est changer!" (Jean-Paul Sartre, « Qu'est-ce que la littérature », 1948, 73)  
"To raise awareness is to change!"

#### **5) Literature**



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