



CRITICAL THEORY AND ONTOLOGY?
ABSTRACT MATTERS AND LOOSE ENDS
MARTIN SAAR

Martin Saar is Professor of Social Philosophy at Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main. He received his M.A. from the Freie Universität Berlin in 1997 and his Ph.D. and his Habilitation in 2004 and 2011 from Goethe University. He was a Visiting Professor teaching Political Theory and Philosophy in Bremen, Hamburg, and Berlin, has studied and taught at the New School for Social Research in New York, and was a Professor of Political Theory at Leipzig University. His areas of interest are contemporary political and social philosophy and the history of political thought (with special foci on Spinoza, Nietzsche, Marxism, Foucault, Critical Theory, Post-structuralism, and interdisciplinary research on collective memory, affect, ideology, history, nature, and power). His dissertation on Nietzsche and Foucault was published in 2007; his book on Spinoza's political thought came out in 2013. In Frankfurt, he is affiliated with the Institute for Social Research and the research center Normative Orders. – Address: Institut für Philosophie, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, Norbert-Wollheim-Platz 1, 60323 Frankfurt am Main. E-mail: saar@em.uni-frankfurt.de.

I had anticipated that my year's project on "Critical Theory after the ontological turn" would not be too easy to explain (and sell) to colleagues outside philosophy. After all, at first glance this theme seems abstract and rather self-referential, rooted firmly in the intellectual history of a certain German philosophical tradition. The term "Critical Theory" (with the capital letters indicating the specific reference) here refers to the programmatic project of a "critical theory of society" originally designed by a handful of mostly Jewish Marxist intellectuals who were members of or close to the Frankfurt-based Institute for

Social Research and had developed this program in the early 1930s and continued it over several decades, with the Institute being reopened after World War II and its two most important members returning from emigration. It is only later and during the tumultuous debates of the 1960s that an intellectual identity and coherence was retroactively constructed under the name “Frankfurt School.” Jürgen Habermas’s enormously influential work is to be counted as the most important contribution of the second generation and, until today, there have been many attempts to, on the one hand, continue and, on the other hand, to revitalize this tradition or style of thought, sometimes from within the German academic cultures where it originated, sometimes in more unorthodox appropriations and re-readings.

My first interest in the topic is indeed almost exclusively historical and internal: How does this ultra-modern philosophical tradition and theoretical context relate to the problem of “being,” one of the oldest philosophical concepts and problems? On many counts, Critical Theory seemed to replace ontological questions with social-theoretical and historical ones, and this seems to testify to its critical and self-reflective form. Tracing Critical Theory’s long-standing aversion and resistance to classical ontology and any form of neo-ontological theorizing, documented best in Adorno’s polemical *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger, is the first reconstructive step to take. Moreover, understanding its logic can help gain a new perspective on some of the internal limitations many critical theories, historical and present, may face.

However, interestingly, the question of ontology (the study of what there is) has gained new prominence in the wake of the rather recent “material” and “ontological turns” in the humanities and social sciences. For many contributors to these debates, a new emphasis on things/materiality, on nature and forms of existence, has rightfully replaced the exclusive focus on (human) society, discourses, and norms. It seems striking that most prominent protagonists of Critical Theory today tend not to engage with the discourses that, even if from a somewhat different angle, touch on some fundamental issues of social theory: power, domination, practices, institutions, and the limits and dynamics of “the social.”

Therefore, my project also has a second, more systematic goal. Understanding and acknowledging the ontological dimension of and in social theory seems to me indispensable in order to fully articulate the stakes and potentials of Critical Theory. To put it rather bluntly: it seems that every theory of society will need (some) ontological elements, an assessment of the very objects it speaks about and a sense of the reality these objects possess. A critical theory of society has to be a material theory of society or social reality, a theory of social being and beings, as it were, and therefore cannot not be ontological.

Ontology, traditionally speaking, is the discourse concerning actually constitutive elements within a given field or realm of reality, their structural features and possible transformations, and possible connections between these elements. The ontology (i.e., the theory of beings/things, of subjects and objects) adequate for the description and understanding of complex and inherently stratified societies (and this is what a “critical theory of society” will try to provide) will be a processual or relational ontology that elucidates the complex interplay of material forces, social practices, and subjectivities. Since none of these elements is atemporal or ahistorical, the adequate social and political ontology (to be used in describing them) cannot be atemporal or ahistorical either.

The ontology corresponding to a critical theory of society will therefore most likely be dynamic and “materialist” in a certain sense, meaning that it in principle 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 their material foundations (in the weak sense), presuppositions, and contexts (think of resources, infrastructures, means of productions, technologies).

For me, the philosophical debate on “weak ontology” in the early 2000s was a first step to account for the ontological dimension of theories that only seemed to be completely post- or anti-ontological and that were definitely anti-essentialist. It can be argued that Critical Theory (in its older and newer forms) performs theoretical operations that are, in this sense, “weakly” ontological yet anti-essentialist. Seen this way, notions like society, power, ideology, social structure, subject, and even politics and democracy have an ontological dimension and status: they define the objects of inquiry in so far as they are taken to be real, effective parts of social reality. And what they refer to shapes and conditions what can be experienced, lived, and thought in the social and political world.

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, and problematizing constitutions in the social world. Even the theory of capitalism, an essential element of this discourse that has its roots in left-Hegelianism and Marxism, aims 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.

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, 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 of all the things, subjects, and objects in a given social world), 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, one might say, i.e., material, specific, and concrete practices situated within the immanence of the social itself.

I do suspect that the seemingly restricted reflection on “nature” (in all the possible senses of the word) within older and current Critical Theory also refers back to its twisted relation to ontological theorizing. It might very well be that entirely non- or anti-ontological theories of nature remain insufficient. Not arguing ontologically often just prolongs implicit default commitments (to a status of nature as the other of the human or of history, devoid of agency, devoid of normativity, devoid of historicity). Arguably, within such a traditional framework, a social theory might not be able to contribute to solving some of the most pressing problems of our time.

The point of an ontological theory of critique is that it takes the material and the social to be two sides of the same coin and tends to localize domination in material reality (or nature) *and* in social normativity (or thought). Philosophy will never fully liberate itself from the material and natural world it thinks (but will also not be a mere reflection of it); the material and natural world as we know is utterly dependent on the ascriptions, meanings, and validities ascribed to it (but is also not fully reducible to those meaning-giving acts either). Critical Theory’s place, as I see it, is right in the middle of these struggles and dynamics, material and non-material, natural and social, human and more-than-human.

Have I succeeded in conveying my fascination for these admittedly abstract concerns to my colleagues from other fields and disciplines? (By the way, I may not even have convinced most of my philosophical friends and colleagues during the valuable discussions we had during the year at the Freie Universität and Humboldt-Universität in Berlin, and in Potsdam, Leipzig, and Kiel). I am unsure, but do not really worry. There were many instances in which and moments when unexpected parallels and shared concerns popped up and provided fascinating themes for discussion. In the work of Max Benz, I found a serious and similarly Foucault-inspired attempt to account for the historicity and the shape-shifting of subjectivity that is based on a conception of the self as a correlate of practices and self-relations, at the same time spiritual and material. I was thrilled to see how eminent colleagues from the humanities like Thomas Kaufmann, Ittai Weinryb, and Karin Leonhard (to name but a few examples) elegantly incorporate perspectives from

material culture into reading religious, social, and art history. In the work of the social scientists Kateryna Burkush, Deborah James, Insa Nolte, Arie Dubnov, and many of the historians of that year, I could sense a deep understanding of the ultra-dynamic variability of social institutions and meanings that is not antithetic to an appreciation of the robustness of power structures and the limits of identities set by their social contexts.

And it has been a deep educational experience, a *Bildungserlebnis* of the first order, to be exposed to discussions with eminent life scientists and evolutionary biologists from which to learn firsthand that the supposedly age-old dichotomies between nature vs. history or nature vs. culture have long ceased to dominate the natural sciences, even if it takes the humanities some time to acknowledge this. Discussions with Lynda Delph, Daven Presgraves, Oren Harman, Rose O’Dea, Michael Taborsky, Lorraine Daston (a leading historian of many of these issues bridging the disciplines), and others have confirmed this impression of mine, even if some of my interlocutors had the suspicion that calling something “nature” or not will definitely mean different things in different contexts. And while there still is some work to do to spell out if and how the material and the natural relate to or coincide with the ontological, as I conceive it, it seems clear that this will require discussions in which the contributions from the natural sciences, philosophy, and the social sciences, especially anthropology, will complement each other and in which empirical and conceptual concerns will merge in ways that call for tools no single discipline will be able to provide.

I brought home a book-sized notebook, imprinted with the Wiko logo, that I bought at the Wiko reception and have used for lecture notes and little reports during the year. My notes stop at page 103 (I have a rather small handwriting); the last event covered was the farewell lecture by the prominent cultural theorist Joseph Vogl at Humboldt-Universität, a week after the Wiko term ended, a quite important event in the Berlin academic calendar of 2023. Drawing on a plethora of literary and philosophical sources, Vogl insisted on the epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical value and function of *Schweben*, acts of floating, pending, or gliding, and argued forcefully for a style of thinking in recognition of it, not fully elevated from the ground, but not fully touching it either, for bearing with the dynamism and the vertigo of the instable. Looking through my notes from the Wiko colloquia and events, little references to art shows and theater plays and readings, I remain amazed at how much can fit into one (short) year: insights and thoughts that (hopefully) remain firm and stable, but also ideas and experiences that float, effortlessly, like the swans on the Herthasee.