

## RECENSIONS

John O'Neill, ed., *On Critical Theory*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1976, pp. 265, \$14.95 cloth.

The relationship between philosophy and history is a fundamental theme in western thought, the articulation of which is central to philosophical self-understanding. In this regard, the twentieth century is unique; we have access to elaborations ranging from the Platonic to the irrational and the totalitarian — from, in Horkheimer's terms, the apogee of objective reason to the nadir of subjective reason. However, a peculiar unease characterizes the relationship between contemporary self-images and those of the past; the profound discontinuities in the historical experience of this century are paralleled in theoretical reflection. As a result, attempts to articulate the contemporary human condition confront a double problem: under conditions of advanced capitalism, the fragmentation of experience dissolves traditional understandings as it destroys the apparent possible sources of collective identity. What becomes problematic, therefore, is the ability critically to conceptualize the historical experience of the dissociation of social being and social consciousness, and the fragmentation of memory.

Accordingly, the self-image appropriate to critical theoretical discourse is one embodying a profound sensitivity to its own vulnerability. This should not lead to isolation, but rather to efforts aimed at encouraging intellectual dialogue and exchange. Such a sensitivity animates this collection of essays edited by John O'Neill. The twelve articles here address a variety of concerns within critical theory, seen both as a mode of post-Marxian social theorizing and as an actual body of work produced by the "founding fathers" of the Frankfurt School.

In his opening article, "Critique and Remembrance", O'Neill argues that "forgetfulness closes history whereas remembrance keeps open both the past and the utopian future of man" (p. 4). Domination, in his view, produces an "apocalyptic separation of the past from the future" (p. 2), with the result that cognition and sensibility are severed within lived experience. The prospects for liberation — of reintegrating these dimensions of human existence — are dependent, therefore, on a prior, painful fidelity to the historical experience of domination. In this regard, O'Neill upholds Marcuse against Habermas; in his view, Marcuse "preserves the power of suffering and its redemption to mobilize social criticism and political action" (p. 4). Further, he argues that Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed" is the practical expression of emancipatory praxis. Thus, he urges a radical reconstruction of existence and its theoretical expression, based on the dialogical process of "conscientization". Only then will theory grasp existence "scientifically".

In contrast to O'Neill, Ben Agger argues for new theoretical formulations "responsive to the altered nature of the socio-cultural world" (p. 12). Against

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Adorno, whom he identifies (incorrectly, in my view) with abject resignation and sterile aestheticism, Agger argues for a more concrete and structurally less negative conception of opposition to domination. He is especially critical of Adorno's alleged freezing of the dialectic, by which is meant the illegitimate collapse of hope. Instead, he endorses Marcuse's "new sensibility" and O'Neill's "wild sociology" which, because they reflect still-present currents of prepolitical protest, preserve a kernel of positive hope. For Agger, what is needed is a critical theory which can break the silence of domination, which can "oppose inhumanity in different songs of joy" (p. 32).

Unfortunately, despite the perceptiveness and enthusiasm of the author, the article falls prey to what can be called "nominalism for the insider", evidenced here by an overzealous orchestration of concepts and categories. As a result, some valid concerns expressed in the article are blurred unnecessarily, and others appropriated misleadingly.

Christian Lenhardt's "The Wanderings of Enlightenment" is a detailed examination of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of Odysseus in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. There, the portrayal is allegorical; the wanderings of Odysseus are recast against the precarious journey of subjective reason in its emancipation from myth. Lenhardt argues that the allegory is valid and of continuing significance inasmuch as the dialectic it identifies between myth and enlightenment is still unresolved, but that two factors are responsible for its seeming distance from current experience. Fear of death, he says, and the dread it warrants in the face of the technification of experience, appear to have been eclipsed by emotional frigidity; consequently, even direct assaults on human sensibility are perceived only fragmentarily. Furthermore, the attempt to articulate this eclipse confronts an illusory silence, behind which is the experience of the unthinkable: the reality of Auschwitz. Especially in Adorno, Lenhardt argues, the desperate refusal to relativize this experience becomes problematic in that it tends to embrace a quasi-religious totalization of evil.

According to Paul Piccone in his "Beyond Identity Theory", the Frankfurt thinkers' theoretical synthesis is a frozen philosophical reflection of the 1930s, in that their hostility to Edmund Husserl's early work blinded them to the value of subsequent developments in phenomenological theory. In his view, the critical theorists' rejection of phenomenology precluded their being able to bridge methodologically the disjunction between being and consciousness, and led to what he alleges is the social impotence of critical theory. Piccone further argues that the failure to adopt phenomenology as the epistemological foundation of a reconstructed collective subject left Marcuse and Adorno "with the old Hegelian dialectic and all of its traditional problems" (p. 140). Therefore, a critical appropriation of the Frankfurt School's heritage, from his perspective, would move beyond identity theory — as embodied both in the Hegelian dialectic and in the form of methodological critique which uses the "logic of

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the essence'' as its principle weapon.

Curiously, Piccone makes no mention of differences between Adorno and Marcuse. Specifically, in Marcuse's later work, hostility to identity theory increasingly is tempered by speculation regarding human nature. In addition, the suggestion in *An Essay on Liberation* of a "biological foundation for socialism" would seem to offer the basis for circumventing many traditional epistemological concerns by focussing on the issue of human needs.

A rambling essay on Erich Fromm by Ken O'Brien and an interesting discussion of Walter Benjamin and the aesthetic problem of temporality by Ioan Davies fill out the thematic first half of the collection. To a greater or lesser extent, the remaining articles deal with the work of Jürgen Habermas, some directly, others indirectly. The articles by Jeremy Shapiro and Shierry Weber are reconstructions of traditional themes in critical theory, the former concerning itself with the Marxian dialectic of nature and history, and the latter with the relationship between self-reflection and aesthetic experience. Shapiro offers an essentially Marcusean reading of Marx, relying on the concept of "embeddedness in nature", which describes the domination of the present by the past. His substantive concern, however, is to argue for adoption of Habermas' communication theory of society, on the grounds that it can provide simultaneously an analysis of prehistorical domination and an evolutionary account of the emancipatory rupture with prehistory.

Similarly, Shierry Weber argues that in providing an inter-subjective grounding of domination *and* emancipation in the processes of self-reflection, Habermas' model provides a new basis for relating liberation and the aesthetic. Hence, what is needed, according to her, is a reconstruction of aesthetics which locates its emancipatory power both in the autonomy and reciprocity it presupposes for subject and object, and in the intersubjectivity of self-reflection entailed by aesthetic experience.

Dieter Misgeld and Friedrich Sixel provide accounts of ongoing debates between Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Niklas Luhmann. These formidably dense articles have the value of making more readily accessible a series of discussions regarding the relationships between critical theory, hermeneutics, and systems theory, which have exercised German-speaking theorists in recent years. However, their very status as introductory summaries imposes serious limitations. The level of abstraction inherent in these debates virtually forbids easy access; at the same time it creates the paradoxical situation in which the utility of introductions is eclipsed by the necessity of direct reference to the original works. For the reader unable to follow the debates in German, the situation is even more problematic in that the relevant literature only now is beginning to be translated.

The articles by H.T. Wilson and Albrecht Wellmer are probably the most rewarding of the twelve, and the most difficult, in that they attempt to bring to

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bear recent developments in critical theory on a series of issues ranging from the epistemological reconstruction of Marxism, to the problem of formal and substantive rationality articulated by Max Weber. The core of Wellmer's elegant presentation is Habermas' "epistemological explication of historical materialism" which, in Wellmer's view, provides a critical approach to the problem of instrumental rationality, while avoiding the residual positivist reductionism he alleges to exist in Marx and the first generation of Frankfurt theorists. By grounding emancipatory knowledge in a theory of communication, Wellmer believes that Habermas is establishing the epistemological basis of a future materialist version of the *Phenomenology of Mind* — in other words, a theory realizing the Marxian project of a simultaneous unification and transcendence of idealism and materialism.

Against this view, I would argue that Habermas' communication theory is inappropriate as an emancipatory model in that the central role it allocates to therapeutic "dialogue" tends to vitiate its concern for the restoration of subjecthood and autonomy. First, it abstracts the process of the social construction of reality from the historical content of that reality. I accept as non-controversial the notion that the distortion of humanity by domination is reciprocally related to the distortion of communication. What is problematic is that naming historical reality as domination does not sanction a quasi-Kantian retreat into the realm of the understanding via the hypothesis of the ideal speech situation. At the very least, this fails to counter the possibility of ontological deformation by historical experience. Additionally, the deflation of the public realm effected by such a strategy has serious implications for locating the dynamics of domination. The way out of a "political economy of repression" lies not, I would suggest, in a return to a mythical realm of perfect competition, for the very structure of reified exchange is but a seeming equivalence cloaking substantive inequality. In this sense, the therapeutic dialogue is asymmetrical; the alleged reciprocity embodied in it is purely formal, constituted by the authority and expertise of the analyst.

Wilson examines Habermas' critique of Marcuse's "new science", and attempts to draw out the implications of both positions regarding the Weberian problem of rationality. Additionally, he is concerned to situate this debate in the context of the 1960s debate between Popper and members of the Frankfurt School. He accuses Habermas of misinterpreting Marcuse's position and consequently of arguing that science is inherently instrumental at the level of its formal epistemic structure. For Wilson this is symptomatic, on Habermas' part, of a broader tendency toward an empirical redefinition of Marxism. The implications of such a redefinition, according to Wilson, are a diminished role for theory, and a practical position dangerously close to the piecemeal social engineering approach advocated by Popper. Thus, he argues, ". . . these re-

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cent developments in his thinking clearly portend the end of critical theory'' (p. 226).

This collection of essays contains a good deal of interesting material, touching a wide variety of issues in and relating to critical theory. Yet to the extent that the increasing availability of the relevant texts has tended to create a readership for critical theory, it has also, I think, diminished the overall utility of introductory compilations. Thus, while this volume is adequate as an introduction, I hope that theorists will move beyond introductions and into the sort of sustained theoretical inquiry that the literature invites.

Charles Rachlis  
Political Economy  
University of Toronto

James Mallory, *Social Credit and the Federal Power in Canada*. University of Toronto Press, 1977, second edition, pp. xviii, 204, \$5.95 paper.

The immediate national preoccupation amongst Canadians about the nation's future has brought into the open more divisive factions than we normally care to acknowledge. Although the conflicts can be analyzed from numerous perspectives, sooner or later attention is focussed on the federal government. Can it respond to problems of regionalism, poverty, multiculturalism, bilingualism, energy and economic expansion? If so, what is the most appropriate response?

Since Canadian academics have long been preoccupied with both the constitution and the Québec question, there is no shortage of books and articles on these subjects. If anything, intellectuals within English Canada have been overly concerned with the stability of the Canadian national system, applauding any move by the federal government to strengthen its position within Confederation. They have argued that Canada's existence depended largely on a strong central government. One such book, *Social Credit and the Federal Power in Canada* has recently been re-issued in paperback, twenty-two years after the original edition.

This is not an age in which it is popular to support the federal government. First, and perhaps most foremost, the national Liberal Party has lost its public appeal. It is aging and while it is still capable of partisan manipulation that knows no decency, there are no new leaders emerging from the ranks. Luckily for them, the other three parties are in equally desperate straits so that voters are being forced to support governments that would otherwise be unattractive.