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The Costs of the Democratic Turn in Political Theory

Albena Azmanova

Abstract

The article explores the ‘democratic turn’ in political theory and the nascent ideological status of the concept of democracy in academic inquiry. The object of its scrutiny are those mechanisms intrinsic to theorising through which democratic theory might undertake an ideological function. As a test case, the inquiry examines the effect of the democratic turn Jürgen Habermas has undertaken in critical social theory of Frankfurt School origin. The original commitment of Critical Theory to emancipation from injustices afflicting capitalist democracies was pursued through a critique of ideology as part of the larger critique of the dynamics of capitalism. The critical enterprise was marked by suspicions, inherited from Marx, of the complicity of liberal democracy in capitalism's delictum. This allowed the pursuit of radical social change beyond the conditions for democratic citizenship. Tracing the deepening of the democratic turn in Habermas’s analyses of modern society, I note a transition from a critique of ideology to ideology-construction – a move in which the institutions of democratic citizenship become reified and overburdened with a task they are not equipped to perform – that of radical social transformation. Performed in this way, the democratic turn dampens critical theory’s emancipatory potency.

Introduction: The ascendance of democracy in political theoryⁱ

Democracy, or ‘the growing role of the common man in the affairs of state’, in Eric Hobsbawm’s phrasing (2000 [1975], 122), became an unstoppable historical force in the second half of the 19th century. For quite some time until then, the concept had carried the derogatory connotation of mob rule, a regime of the ignorant masses; it had been absent not only from the vocabulary of polite politics and educated scholarship, but also from the language of the American and the French revolutions of the 18th century.ⁱⁱ When Thomas Jefferson and James Madison formed the Democratic-Republican Party in 1792, this was an early sign of the term’s rapidly changing historical connotation. By 1870, the democratisation of politics in Western societies had become irreversible – ‘the exclusion of the masses from politics seemed a utopian undertaking,’ even as the prospect of mass democracy was still unpalatable to ruling elites (Hobsbawm 2000 [1975], 123, 1987, 85).¹

It took, however, another century for the idea of democracy to reign supreme in political theory. In 1951, David Easton lamented the declining rigour of political theory, the exhaustion of its creative energies and its penchant for turning to the past for inspiration: ‘Contemporary political thought lives parasitically on ideas a century old and, what is more discouraging, we see little prospect of the development of new political syntheses’. Easton empanelled two reasons for the impoverishment of theory. First, political theorists had abandoned theory’s unique function – ‘creatively constructing a valuational frame of reference’; that is, offering ideas about the desirable course of human affairs. Second, energy had been diverted away from building a systematic theory about political behaviour and the operation of political institutions. To vigorously connect these two orders of knowledge – fact and value – is the high task of political theory, he urged (Easton 1951, 36).

This task was eventually accomplished by the democratic turn in political theory – the emergence of a body of scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century that delineated a subfield known as ‘democratic theory’. This development was aided by three waves of historical upheaval: decolonization in the 1960s, the 1970s’ democratization in Southern Europe, Latin America and Asia, and the collapse of the (quasi) communist dictatorships in

Eastern and Central Europe with the end of the Cold War. As democracy became the dominant regime across the world and democracy-promotion an avowed foreign policy ambition, so did democratic theory ascend to its hegemonic position in political theory. Democratic theory confidently rose to Easton's challenge by making democracy both an empirical object of analysis (addressing institutional structures and political behaviour) and a matrix of valuation (a normative frame of reference). However, in what follows, I will claim that, under certain conditions, democratic theory is apt to mutate into ideology, placing its analytical functions in the service of political ones. When it switches to an ideological mode of operation, democratic theory places its analytical rigour, albeit inadvertently, at the service of conservative political goals – namely, of normalizing and therefore stabilising relations of oppression.

I am setting aside the amply-discussed deliberate misuse of the discourse of democracy in the pursuit of an imperialistic agenda – the deliberate politicisation of democratic theory. Any set of values can be hijacked for nefarious political purposes, just like the totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and China did with the ideals of communism, or neoliberal capitalism did with the hedonistic irreverence of 1968. Neither do I hold that theory should be objective in the sense of being value-free and therefore politically neutral. Any framework of conceptualisation selectively articulates what is relevant and how it is meaningful, and is therefore part of struggles over the structuring of the social order. To remain critical of power dynamics, democratic theory needs to, at a minimum, be cognizant of, and come to terms with, the particular ideological nature of its own theorising.

I therefore undertake to explore the mechanisms *intrinsic to theorising* through which democratic theory is prone to reproduce the very ideological effects it purports to critique. In other words, I propose to investigate the ideological kernel contained in a certain type of scientific analysis of modern western societies that proceeds as a scrutiny of the institutional configurations and normative arsenal of liberal democracy.

In what follows, I will argue that democratic theory starts performing an unintended ideological function when the mechanisms of theorizing contain an incestuously close co-existence between democracy as an *object* of analysis, a *normative horizon* of critique, a social *ontology* (a set of presuppositions about society from which the inquiry proceeds) and a *tool* of progressive social change. When such circularity emerges, democratic theory, I will claim, becomes a source of normative validation for its purported object of critique. Theory transforms

from an explanatory device with a critical, world-disclosing purpose into a doctrine – a conceptual mechanism of justification and stabilisation of power relations.

When speaking of the ideological effects of the democratic turn in political theory I do not have in mind ideology as an explicit political doctrine, a dogma – akin to the way Marxism was deployed by the dictatorships in East and Central Europe and is still used in China. Neither do I refer to ideology as ‘false consciousness’ that is to be dissolved when confronted by the scientific method (this connotation implies that there is a cognitively pure, socially untainted mental state).ⁱⁱⁱ Rather, I refer to ideology as a system of beliefs and attitudes (collective rationalisations) accepted unreflectively by the agents who hold them. As these ideas are thus endowed with the status of commonsense, they delineate a normative horizon beyond which critique and criticism cannot reach. In this way, they mask, or divert attention away from, the manner in which these ideas originate in relations of power, validate these relations, and supply legitimacy to forms of socialisation that perpetuate these power relations.

Importantly, ideology is not simply a matter of normativity, of valorisation of rules and practices. It is also a vehicle for establishing and maintaining the social conditions needed for the unproblematic reproduction of the system of social relations that yields the particular ideological constructs. A political theory or philosophy could play an ideological role in society, notes Raymond Geuss, ‘in that it fostered certain common ideological illusions, made them more difficult to detect, or created new ones, e.g. the idea [...] that all people in every society everywhere aspire before all else to a particular kind of “democratic” political culture’ (2008, 53). The shift from theory to dogma is not rooted in the empirical observation that some societies at a certain historical conjuncture might be endorsing democracy. The ideological transgression, rather, germinates from the conjecture (the idea) that this is the case – a presupposition built into the very foundation of theorising. To be sure, vetting political theory as a standard bearer of democracy is not necessarily objectionable. Yet political decency and academic honesty command that, whenever it enters into a mode of ideology-production, democratic theory admits and effectively endorses such a function – and pays the requisite price for it.

As a test case of my hypothesis I will take critical social theory of Frankfurt School origin (hereafter Critical Theory)^{iv}, and will focus on the democratic turn that Jürgen Habermas has effected within this school of thought. Critical Theory is a particularly appropriate object for

the study of the relations between theory and ideology within democratic theory for at least three reasons. Firstly, it inherits from Karl Marx the ideal of democracy as a form of emancipated society – that is, society emancipated from the imperatives of the competitive production of profit and therefore able to focus on long-term societal interest. In this sense, Critical Theory constitutes a form of democratic theory. Secondly, it has maintained a commitment to eliminating the injustices that afflict capitalist democracies (such as growing material inequalities as well as gender and racial discrimination) which remain central concerns of democratic theory today. Thus, Critical Theory’s treatment of forms of discrimination is part of its critique of democratic capitalism as a comprehensive social formation – analysis informed of Marxian critique of political economy and Freudian psychoanalysis. The first generation of Frankfurt School authors has interpreted racialized and gendered social roles as part of an oppressive ideology and the construction of exclusive collective identities as a strategy for oppression.^v Thirdly, the intellectual enterprise of unmasking injustice is pursued through a critique of ideology (*Ideologiekritik*) – systems of beliefs and attitudes (collective rationalizations) accepted unreflectively by the agents who hold them (Geuss 1981, 20).^{vi} In this sense, theory is deliberately on the alert for the entrapments of ideology.

Jürgen Habermas’s iteration of Critical Theory warrants particular attention because the author is explicitly dedicated to constructing a theory of democratic politics. He contends that the continuous *proceduralization* of the democratic ideal (putting in place procedures for nurturing and enacting the democratic will) safeguards us from the temptation of ideology-construction -- social criticism thus keeps clear from a *substantive* normative project susceptible to ideological sanctification. Tracing the deepening of the democratic turn in Habermas’s analyses of modern society, however, I discern, an inadvertent transition from a critique of ideology to ideology-construction. Underlying this transition is the recasting of critical social theory that Habermas undertakes. As conceived by the first generation of Frankfurt School thinkers, critique was an aporetic inquiry animated by a commitment to emancipation from domination without the guidance of transcendental ideals. Habermas, instead, rebuilds critical theory as a normative political theory guided by the ideal of democracy as a matrix of justice, a (counterfactual) conceptual device for identifying injustices, as well as a practical institutionalisation of a just society. This shift charts a secure path for progressive politics. Yet, this security comes at a price – that of narrowing, if not altogether foreclosing, the critical enterprise because democracy transforms from an essentially contested concept with a heuristic and critical purpose to one designating a final destination, a telos – both conceptually and

politically.^{vii} In what follows, I will first review some of the tenets of Critical Theory as formulated by its founders, with particular attention paid to democracy and ideology critique. I will then trace the democratic turn in the work of Jürgen Habermas in order to disclose the particular mechanisms that tend to misdirect democratic theory into the mode of ideology-construction.

The democratic credentials of Critical Theory

The first generation of Frankfurt School authors set out to develop a dialectical social theory with a practical emancipatory intent; the idea of emancipation, both as a normative yardstick and a political goal, is what distinguishes ‘critical theory’ from a positivistic theory that aims at description and explanation (Horkheimer 2002 [1937]). This normative commitment to emancipation does not set an unquestionable normative horizon (and thus, does not deteriorate into ideology) because emancipatory critique is not driven by a distinct telos susceptible to sanctification. This is a commitment, to use a phrase coined by Amy Allen, to ‘emancipation without Utopia’ (Allen 2015).^{viii} Critical Theory inherits this aversion to grand normative ideals from Marx, who rejects romantic visions of communism and offers no detailed account of a post-capitalist society beyond the idea that such a society would institutionalise the values of social cooperation and mutuality: thus, communism becomes the only possible realization of democracy as the spontaneous self-organisation of the people (*Critique of the Gotha Programme* 1875; *German Ideology* 1845). For Marx, ‘communism is not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things’ (Marx 1845).

Emancipation is therefore to be understood as a process, not a final point, a terminus: it is a process of identifying and removing the *circumstances* of oppression (Horkheimer 1982, 244), rather than offering a blueprint for the institutional framework and normative substance of an emancipated life. Admittedly, in Marx’s analysis of the movement of history from one social order to another, communism is also a social formation that is to supersede capitalism. However, Marx does not elaborate the normative substance of communism other than in the most inclusive conception of humanism – a condition where ‘the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto* 1848). Marx’s ideas of Communism’s institutional infrastructure (e.g. public ownership of the means of production) do not arise out of an abstract search for the institutionalisation of the values of solidarity and mutuality, but through a scrutiny of the harmful dynamics of 19th century capitalism. The

private property of the means of production is to be eliminated because of the specific form of injustice (e.g. exploitation) that it generates, as well as because it becomes a hindrance to the further development of the forces of production and to technological advancement. In a word, while democracy is present as a normative ideal, the analysis proceeds in the form of critical scrutiny of the historically specific forms of injustice and the underlying dynamics and structures that generate these injustices.^{ix}

While identifying and fighting oppression is a goal of the intellectual enterprise, the critique of ideology (*Ideologiekritik*) was adopted by the early Frankfurt School authors as a key instrument of critique. The systems of beliefs and attitudes (collective rationalisations) accepted unreflectively by the agents who hold them are at the center of Critical Theory's scrutiny. However, the ultimate ambition of *Ideologiekritik* is not just to destabilize the oppressive certainty of normative attitudes (to deprive them of their status of common-sense), but also to unveil the social conditions and power dynamics within which these normative attitudes emerge; critique is to provide 'a comprehensive insight into the objective origin of ideologies and the objectivity of their social function' (Adorno 1972 [1956], 185). Ideologies contain a grain of truth in the sense that they originate within intersubjective (ergo, objectively existing) power dynamics, which themselves are rooted within social structures. Proper critique of ideology therefore necessitates an analysis of the 'conditions which make them [individuals] what they are or to which they are subject' within a study of 'the objective historical constellations' and the structures that underpin them (Adorno 1972 [1956], 184). I will abstain from venturing here a detailed clarification of what is meant by the 'objectivity' of the structured social environment that critique is to target.^x What is important for the purposes of the current inquiry is to note that critique is to focus not on substantive *states* of autonomy (ideals of autonomous life) but instead on *conditions* of autonomy (enabling conditions) and processes of gaining autonomy – our social environment must be appropriately structured to allow collective self-determination.

Those 'objective historical constellations' that are to be the terrain of critique are the various iterations of capitalism as a comprehensive social order. Thus, in his analysis of capitalism, Adorno often refers to it as the 'social whole' (e.g. Adorno 1937), a 'social totality' which is fractured yet internally structured (e.g. Adorno 1973, 47).^{xi} From its inception, Critical Theory adopts from Marx an understanding of capitalism as a historically specific comprehensive system of social relations. It develops as a school of thought through historicist analyses of capitalism as a social formation shaped by the dynamics of capital accumulation (the competitive profit

production), of the institutional and normative infrastructure through which these dynamics are enacted, and of the forms of life they engender.^{xii}

The historicist nature of social analysis is here of paramount importance. As Marx notes, ‘we will have to examine the history of men, since almost the whole ideology amounts either to a distorted conception of this history or to a complete abstraction from it. Ideology is itself only one of the aspects of this history.’ (Marx, *German Ideology* 1845).^{xiii} The normative task of emancipation is to be achieved by deploying philosophy and social science in interdisciplinary empirical social research (Horkheimer 1993). Such an ambitious programme of analysis would require a comprehensive social theory which the first generation of Frankfurt School authors achieve through building a synthesis between a Marxian critique of the political economy of capitalism and an analysis of mass psychology informed by Freudian psychoanalysis. Indeed, the critiques of capitalist society developed by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Friedrich Pollock, Otto Kirchheimer, Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, took the shape of historicist analyses ranging from a critique of consumerism and mass culture, militarism, environmental crisis, and economic disruption, to analyses of the authoritarian personality.

What is the status of liberal democracy as an object of critique within Critical Theory, thus conceived? To the extent that the institutional edifice and normative matrix of liberal democracy are part of democratic capitalism as a unitary (albeit fractured) social order, they become objects of scrutiny for Critical Theory.^{xiv} Because the original commitment to emancipation was pursued through a critique of the dynamics of capitalism and its attendant socio-cultural representations, critical theorists inherited from Marx suspicions of the complicity of liberal democracy in capitalism’s delictum. Importantly, object of critique and target of criticism is the manner in which the conception of liberal democracy and its particular institutionalisations underpin dynamics of oppression. It is in this sense that for Critical Theory of Frankfurt School origin democracy is an essentially contested concept – the process of contestation consists not so much in maintaining the conceptual indeterminacy of the notion of democracy as in questioning the work that the notion does in view of the emancipatory commitments of critical theory.^{xv}

Marx’s misgivings about liberalism and liberal democracy are well known. They have to do with the universalistic normative content of natural law and social contract traditions underpinning the institutional model of liberal democracy. Marx insists that the human essence should be grasped not as an ‘abstraction inherent in each single individual’, but instead as social essence,

whose reality is the ‘ensemble of the social relations’ (*Thesis on Feuerbach*, 1845: VI). It is this ontology of the socially embedded individual, the socially constructed nature of human subjectivity, and of social life as a unity of historically specific social practices that prevents the abstract values of rationality and mutuality (which undergird the idea of democracy) from being vetted also as instruments and procedures for attaining a democratic form of society. Moreover, Marx holds that by forging the idea of legal persons as seemingly free and equal, and thus of bearers of equal individual rights, liberal constitutionalism mimics the contract relationship governing the bourgeois economy, thereby masking the structures of social inequality on which the system is based. Marx’s misgivings about the institutional edifice of liberal democracy are shared by the first generation of Frankfurt school authors. Marcuse speaks of the ‘repressive tolerance’ of liberal democracy (Marcuse 1965); he rejects the democratic argument for tolerance (of all positions, including those of the misinformed and the bigots) because this argument is ‘invalidated by the invalidation of the democratic process itself,’ i.e., by the concentration of economic and political power in late capitalism (a theme that Habermas takes up later). Indeed, deficiencies in the existing practice of democracy and the inability of the institutional paraphernalia of liberal democracy to embed a just society remain of core interest for critical theorists to this day, in the work of Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth, Amy Allen, Rainer Forst, and many others.

To be sure, critical theory inherits from Marx a commitment to democracy as a spontaneous self-organisation of the people. Importantly, members of the tradition share an understanding of the non-alienated form of collective human existence as a rational *society*, not just a political system; the democratic state of society is one in which ‘all conditions of social life that are controllable by human beings depend on real consensus’ (Horkheimer 1982, 249f). However, this normative commitment does not transform into an ideological endorsement of democracy as a political system because the social theory through which the critique is conducted does not have a place for a socially unencumbered self and a rational society in its ontology – that is, democracy is not among the set of presuppositions from which the social world is viewed. That ontology is instead centered on the notion of human beings as *social* beings whose social essence is shaped by the ensemble of social relations – as I noted in the earlier discussion of Marx. Thus, a distance is preserved between a normative commitment to a democratic society and an understanding of the socially constituted reality. To obtain ‘real democracy’, procedural mechanisms and institutional devices would therefore not do; one would need to change the system of social relations within which human beings interact. Critique therefore takes shape as an analysis of the historically

specific dynamics, institutional settings and structures of socialisation, with particular attention to the power dynamics generating domination – including those that run under the auspices of legitimate democratic procedures.

Within such an understanding of the tasks and methods of Critical Theory, the fallacy of the democratic turn would not be related to the intrinsic qualities of liberal democracy as a political system or the emancipatory normative potential contained in the principles of equality and liberty, but rather in *the nature of theory* deployed in the analysis of society. When critique is performed without attention to the historically specific power dynamics and social structures that underpin the institutions and enact the norms of liberal democracy, those institutions and norms become liable to serve the very interests which emancipatory critique is to unmask. Adorno notes that the price of failing to perform a critique of ideology as a comprehensive analysis of the historical circumstances and structural conditions of oppression is twofold. On the one hand, it enables the perpetuation of the conditions of oppression, on the other hand, it supplies the oppression with justification: ‘the domination over the deluded is also justified’ (Adorno 1972 [1956], 184).

The first generation of Critical Theory scholars deploy these tenets of critique – a normative commitment to a democratic society enacted via a critique of capitalism as a historically specific system of social relations – through a wide-ranging investigation into the transition from nineteenth-century liberal capitalism to the monopolistic and state-managed capitalism (*Spätkapitalismus*) of the twentieth century.^{xvi}

Habermas’s democratic turn

Habermas’s first publications (on consumer society, the media, work and leisure) retain the features of analysis typical of the first generation of Frankfurt School authors – a historicist critique of the oppressive dynamics of democratic capitalism as a comprehensive social formation. His first major work, his post-doctoral dissertation (‘Habilitationsschrift’) *The Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere* (1989 [1962]) provides a historical account of the emergence and consolidation in 18th-century Europe (the time of pre-industrial, liberal capitalism) of a critical public with its own institutionalised sphere of action. He credits this public with a capacity to hold state power accountable through the use of reason in a process of argumentation. Here the perspective of critique alters: analysis centres on the democratic constitutional state; the main emancipatory concern is the power asymmetry between central

political authority and citizenry. Attention is shifted away from the processes of socialisation, of the social production of reasoning publics. Tellingly, Adorno and Horkheimer found the dissertation insufficiently critical of the ideology of liberal democracy, and rejected it (Calhoun 1992, 4f).^{xvii}

From the historical account of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere, with its (purported) emancipatory powers, Habermas derives the philosophical construct of the public sphere as a realm of social interactions (ideally) impervious to the malign influence of money and power, in which citizens relate to one another as fully rational beings. This philosophical construct becomes the social ontology from the perspective of which Habermas develops his critique of the dynamics of modernity. On this conceptual foundation Habermas then builds his diagnosis about the erosion of the democratic public sphere in the conditions of modern mass society in late capitalism. It is worth noting that the very entry point of analysis – the bourgeois public sphere – presupposes an unproblematic co-existence between the dynamics of capitalism and those of democratic citizenship. In this account, under the impact of industrialization and the rise of consumerism in late capitalism, the concerns of efficiency that are central to the dynamics of economic production and administrative rule start to penetrate the cultural system, eventually stifling genuine democratic debate. The active publicity of genuine democracy is replaced by the passive consumption of technical media of communication and entertainment. As a result, the separation between the private, public, and political realms on which classical bourgeois democracy had depended is lost. The public sphere becomes indivisible from the sphere of private conflict, which ultimately imperils democracy. In this first comprehensive analysis Habermas articulates of modern society, it is the erosion of the structural conditions for democracy, understood as the autonomy of the public sphere, that marks advanced capitalism. The solution is implied in the diagnosis – a secure institutionalisation of the democratic public sphere must be provided so as to safeguard it from the perilous instrumental dynamics of modernity.

The democratic turn that Habermas thus undertakes in Critical Theory from the 1960s onwards offers an effective solution to Critical Theory's predicament at the time. By the late 1950s, the emancipatory ambitions of Critical Theory had entered an impasse, with Horkheimer and Adorno articulating a distinctly grim diagnosis of total alienation in the context of advanced capitalism (Azmanova 2019b). It is this aporia – the enduring commitment to emancipatory critique, combined with the apparent impossibility of discerning either a plausible vantage point

of critique or a political project of emancipation -- that prompts Habermas to proffer the notion of a politically emancipated critical public as an agent of emancipation. This, however, would demand a thorough recasting of the intellectual apparatus of critique, which Habermas endeavours to accomplish in subsequent writing by drawing on Kantian moral theory, linguistics, developmental psychology, and systems theory. Ultimately, this would lead him to replace the Marxian critique of capitalism as a comprehensive and historically specific social formation with a critique of modernity's drive for economic and administrative rationalization. The project of emancipation comes to be centered on institutional tools and procedures for democratic citizenship, within an affirmative conception of historical progress (Allen 2016).

Legitimation Crisis (1975 [1973]) delivers an important shift in the social ontology through which the critical enterprise proceeds. Habermas intends this work to be an application of Marx's critique of capitalism to the conditions of the late 20th century. However, he alters Marx's conceptualisation of capitalism as a comprehensive system of social relations by drawing on Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism and Niklas Luhmann's systems theory. In this revised version, society stands as a unity of formalised and relatively autonomous, though inter-connected, economic, administrative, socio-cultural and legitimation systems (or subsystems) of action, each contributing to social integration and with relative functional autonomy from each other. Thus, while like Marx, the first generation of critical theorists perceived democratic capitalism as an institutionalised social order permeated by capitalism's constitutive dynamics – the competitive production of profit (with its concomitant dynamics of commodification, exploitation and alienation) -- Habermas constraints the dynamics of capitalism to the economy as one subsystem alongside others. This would allow him to present the political institutions of democracy and liberal constitutionalism, due to their presumed autonomous status, as vehicles of emancipation.

Let us recall that for Marx, as for the first generation of Frankfurt School authors, rationality itself had been a problem (i.e. as being prone to alienation and false consciousness engendered by capitalist social relations). Habermas purports to solve this problem by way of distinguishing between, on the one hand, the instrumental rationality that eventually entraps reason's emancipatory valence and, on the other, the communicative rationality that preserves its emancipatory power under certain conditions. These conditions refer to maintaining the autonomy of the public sphere (a sphere outside of the institutionalized political system) as a space of free opinion- and will-formation (e.g. Habermas 1984/87 [1981]).

Importantly, Habermas discerns the conditions of emancipated life not in terms of the socio-economic dynamics structuring the system of social relations, but in terms of conditions regarding morality, democracy and law that are propitious to the free opinion- and will-formation of citizens. He holds that the contradictions of advanced capitalism could be brought to consciousness and thematised (and thus addressed) under conditions of substantive democracy – i.e., genuine participation of citizens in the process of discursive political will-formation. To prevent this, the administrative system of capitalist democracies shields itself from the process of free will-formation via the mechanisms of formal democracy that nurture a passive citizenry – in the formula of ‘civic privatism of the civil public’ (political abstinence combined with an orientation towards career, leisure and consumption with attendant demands from public authority for money, leisure time and security). Ultimately, this entails the demise of the public sphere of solidarity and non-instrumental rationality, as this sphere becomes colonized by the technical rationality of administration, deployed in the management of the economy and culture (Habermas 1984/87 [1981]).

Thus, by the 1980s, the nature of Habermas’ social critique has altered significantly – in his analyses the culprit of social injustice becomes not capital but the state (‘administration’, ‘technocracy’), and therefore solutions emerge within the remit of democracy as a political system rather than in the remit of the political economy (e.g. new forms of property; countering the dynamics of capital accumulation). This is predicated on Habermas’s no longer stylizing capitalism as a comprehensive social order, but rather as a domain of value-neutral instrumental rationality (deployed in the production of wealth) which can be oriented towards human values through democracy.

In terms of political emancipation, revolutionary mobilisations are replaced by the procedural mechanisms of deliberative democracy which help establish the principles of legitimate law-making in which the ‘revolutionary subject’ is the rational and reasonable citizenry; collective and individual emancipation is achieved via the consensus of all citizens of a legally constituted community in a dynamic and conflictual process of reason-giving and reason-taking. The key claim is that political deliberation develops a truth-tracking potential, thereby facilitating a legitimation process under certain conditions – namely, that a self-regulating media system gains independence from its social environments and that anonymous audiences enable a feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society (Habermas 2006).

Rather than seeking the emancipatory dimension of socially embodied human rationality (the possibility of undoing alienation and false consciousness) in the structural conflicts endemic to capitalism, Habermas locates these conditions in the structures of linguistic interactions (Habermas 1979 [1976], 1990 [1983], 1984/87 [1981], 1998a). The matrix of emancipated social existence is unencumbered communication. Here Habermas tackles the Marxian problem of false consciousness (that is, the proletariat's incapacity to perceive its proper interests as an exploited class and endorsing, instead, the interest of the bourgeoisie) by replacing the productivist paradigm of society based on labour with a discursive paradigm of society based on communication. In turn, this solution is enabled by the distinction between communicative and strategic forms of rationality and action.

The substitution of the critique of capitalism as a social formation with the philosophy of language has significant consequences for the critical enterprise. Presenting the preconditions for non-alienated communicative rationality (free from the instrumental logics of power and money) in terms of an ideal speech situation of unencumbered communication transforms the immanent critique of capitalist democracies into a constructivist search for the *procedural conditions* for a democratic public sphere that can nurture citizens' capacity for collective self-determination. The historicity of this sphere rests solely on intersubjective communicative procedures which face practical limits in scope and scale.

In his monumental work *Between Facts and Norms* (1998b [1992]) Habermas reinforces his reliance on the properly institutionalised public sphere as he seeks to realize social freedom through law, thus viewing democracy not as a *form of society*, but as a *form of political system* perfectly compatible with a capitalist system of social relations. Let us recall that one of the tenets of Marx's critical approach is the effort to denaturalise and demystify the bourgeois division between, on the one hand, the private sphere of socio-economic existence structured by private rights and, on the other, the sphere of public freedoms, duties and virtues claiming to nurture democratic citizenship. Habermas replaces the Marxian critique of the process through which notions of democratic citizenship render legitimacy to exploitative dynamics in the private sphere with an effort to construct a philosophical formula through which the tension between the sphere of social existence and that of political membership is conceptually resolved. The solution comes in the formula of the co-originality between private and public autonomy within a properly articulated and institutionalised system of rights. With this,

Habermas deepens the liberal-democratic turn in critical theory: the critical enterprise proceeds as a critique of democracy and its cultural and institutional prerequisites (a public sphere of free deliberation) rather than as a critique of the socio-political order (democratic capitalism).

Thus, while for Marx and the early Frankfurt School authors the combination between liberal constitutionalism and democratic citizenship had been part of the problem insofar as it serves capitalist reproduction, for Habermas liberal democracy is part of the solution, as he deems the procedures and institutions of liberal democracy as able to safeguard social solidarity from the systemic logic of economic and administrative efficiency. While Critical Theory had suspected liberal democracy as being the political institutionalisation of bourgeois rule, Habermas champions liberal democracy as being the ‘performative meaning of the practice of self-determination’ (1998b [1992] 110). In his account, liberal democracy, properly institutionalised, can supply the conditions for autonomous political will-formation since it embodies a system of rights that ensures all citizens’ access to equal political participation. We are asked to have faith that, notwithstanding our socialisation within a system of social relations permeated by capitalism’s constitutive dynamics of primitive accumulation and competitive profit-production, we can rely on the institutions of liberal democracy (including an autonomous public sphere) to set us free from that socialisation. At best, this strategy can contribute to the democratization of the *political organization* of capitalism – making capitalism more inclusive. However, we have no solid reasons to believe that the democratization of capitalism will amount to a radical social transformation – that is, a transformation of the very system of social relations.

The recasting of the critical enterprise through what I described as ‘democratic turn’ effected by Habermas has strong advantages. In elaborating his model of deliberative liberal democracy, Habermas retains the commitment to emancipation that has been constitutive for Critical Theory. The values of autonomy and solidarity which had served as normative pillars in the Marxian critique of capitalism undergird Habermas’ trust in the emancipatory potential of non-instrumental, communicative interactions in a genuinely democratic public sphere and a lifeworld untainted by the instrumental rationality of power and money. Moreover, Habermas does not stipulate a substantive ideal of democracy that could become an object of ideology-construction. No norms of justice are offered a priori; democratic publics are not only to validate binding norms, but to generate these through actual processes of reasoned argumentation. This perspective ‘privileges the communicative presuppositions and procedural

conditions of democratic opinion- and will- formation as the sole source of legitimation' (1996, 450, 1995). The quality of democracy stands as a matter of the quality of the process of reasoned deliberation. Henceforth, the task of democratic theory is to articulate the mechanisms and conditions for such a deliberation (Azmanova 2012, 32-39, 100).

However, as Habermas subordinates, and thus trivializes, the critique of capitalism within the larger framework of a critique of the democratic public sphere – whose emancipatory power is conceptualised with the tools of philosophy of language and linguistics – he removes social analysis from political theory. Capitalism is reduced to a market economy and the critique of political economy all but vacates analysis. This deprives critical social theory of the conceptual tools it needs to scrutinise the socio-structural dynamics of domination that embed and condition the very creation of the social subject. The project of emancipation as democratisation of the entire social order, as conceived by the founders of Critical Theory, is reduced to a project of the proper institutionalisation of the public sphere. With this, the status of democracy changes: it becomes a political project, not a form of society.

Through the democratic turn in Critical Theory, thus performed, the enterprise of *Ideologiekritik* transforms from a scrutiny of the historically particular social conditions of injustice and the forms of consciousness these conditions engender into liberal-democratic ideology-construction. Autonomy, social cooperation and mutuality are no longer just ethical values (a valuational frame of reference) -- they are also elements of the social ontology (a description of the human condition) from which the critique draws its fundamental presuppositions. In other words, autonomy, social cooperation and mutuality are deemed to be features of unencumbered anthropological communicative reason which is in turn an enabling condition for democratic reasoned argumentation – a precondition for democracy. Theory thus already presupposes what it tries to demonstrate analytically and achieve politically. When democracy (and its attendant rational and sociable subjects) becomes both a normative ideal and a component of the ontology, the ensuing circularity forecloses the critical enterprise. Democracy as an ideal and an enabling condition for attaining this ideal becomes immune to critical scrutiny -- democracy becomes an idol. This risks making the enterprise of the critique of ideology complicit in moral and ideological justifications for that social order whose injustices and contradictions are meant to form the object of critique. In other words, the democratic turn in Critical Theory has not only deserted the critique of capitalism as an organizing pillar of social criticism. It has also brought the other of its pillars (*Ideologiekritik*)

to a state of limbo as it has embarked on constructing ideological representations of liberal democracy instead of deconstructing the ideological justifications that liberal democracy as a political system supplies to capitalism as a social system. Enters *Ideologiekritik*-cum-ideology-construction.^{xviii} This move eliminates the space of reflexivity within which the on-going contestation of democracy's contribution to emancipation can take place. Once democracy is equated with the emancipatory project itself, the concept can no longer perform the aporetic work of disclosure.

Conclusion: towards a critical democratic theory

What lessons should a political theory that is committed to progressive ends, as democratic theory surely is, draw from the democratic turn in Critical Theory, as effected by Jürgen Habermas? Exactly 400 years ago, Francis Bacon formulated the mission of political theory as charting the road 'between the arrogance of dogmatism, and the despair of skepticism' (Bacon, 2000 [1620], Introduction). In the context of the early twenty-first century – a time beset by the rise of autocrats professing to salvage democracy -- the challenge is to keep our faith in democracy without elevating it to an idol. To stay the course between dogmatism and scepticism, democratic theory needs to preserve the contestability of its core concept – that of democracy -- and deploy it in the aporetic project of critique. This contestability, I have suggested, is not just a matter of maintaining the definitional openness, or indeterminacy, of the notion of democracy. Rather, it consists in on-going scrutiny of the work this notion does in view of the goals of emancipation.

In order to leave the space of reflexive contestation open, a distance needs to be maintained between the normative goals of theory, the social ontology from which theorising proceeds, and the requisite tools of analysis. When these are equated, the ensuing circularity vitiates the rigor of the analysis: in this mode, a theory can do little more than supply normative validation of its object of analysis, thereby becoming a vehicle of ideology construction. When the idea of an emancipated/just society is equated with democratic politics, when democratic politics is posited as a tool of emancipation, and in turn that conceptual edifice is placed on the foundation of an ontology that views human beings as naturally prone to reasonable and rational coordination of their collective existence, democratic theory acquires tremendous authority. Enhancing in this way its own credentials, democratic theory is prone to operate in the manner of a political theology committed to the fostering of democracy as a civil religion. If this is the aspiration of democratic political theory – then we know what road to take.

Indeed, democracy has become one of those rhetorical ‘common-places of common sense’, to borrow Michel Billig’s phrase, a unit of broadly shared knowledge without fixed content, which lulls our thinking as it anchors it. In its mode of Democratic Theory, political theory reinforces our seemingly benevolent ‘democratic prejudice’, thus making us not only poor readers of the past but also poor critics of the present and blinding us to the opportunities of the future.^{xix} This poses a problem especially for any political and social theory that defines itself as a critical enterprise and aspires to offer a valiant critique of capitalism as a system of social relations. Such a critical effort cannot only seek to disclose the ways in which capitalism imperils democracy, but must also clarify the ways in which liberal democracy as a political system hampers or enables capitalism as a social system. To the extent that democratic politics concerns institutionally mediated expressions of broadly shared preferences, democracy as a political system functions on the terrain of socially produced subjectivities. This is not a matter of ‘false consciousness’, ill will or deficient rationality. As Wolfgang Streeck observes, ‘expectations in relation to which the political-economic system must legitimate itself exist not only among the population, but also on the side of capital-as-actor’ (Streeck 2017, 21). The dynamics of capital reproduction affect, even if they do not constitute, the democratic subjects. It is in this way that liberal democracy becomes not only hostage to the exploitative dynamic of capitalism but also complicit in these dynamics. Even in conditions of fully democratised capitalism, when the structures of private property of the means of production and the attendant asymmetries of power are eliminated, democratic citizens can remain fully committed to the process of capital reproduction with all its deleterious effects on human beings, their societies and their natural environment. That we are all equally complicit in, and equally damaged by, these dynamics is not much of a consolation. This means that political theory should remain committed to the normative ideals of democracy without burdening democratic politics of inclusion and equality with the task of radical social transformation. If it is to discern the path for such a transformation towards a more just society, critical political theory should aim to develop as a sociologically informed critique of the historically specific social order we inhabit. For truly democratic politics demands a truly democratic society.

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ⁱⁱ As Pierre Rosanvallon reminds us, the term democracy did not belong to the vocabulary of Enlightenment philosophers and it was not until 1848 that the word democracy definitively entered political discourse in France. Between 1789 and 1796, none of the numerous revolutionary newspapers and journals used ‘democracy’ or ‘democratic’ in their name. In the U.S., the Founding Fathers used the term democracy to address the political ills and dangers they sought to avoid, and calling someone a ‘democrat’ was almost an insult at the outset of the nineteenth century (Rosanvallon 2009, 541). In Montesquieu and Tocqueville’s well-known accounts, democracies are marked by instability and a tendency to become corrupt – flaws that accompany the virtues of democracy, in their accounts. Kant’s taxonomy of political regimes has a place for despotic democracy. It is all the more curious that at the French National Constituent Assembly of 1789 supporters of the monarchy (the group of the *Monarchiens*) also called themselves ‘Democratic Royalists’.

ⁱⁱⁱ In its original usage, as conceived by Antoine Destutt, Comte de Tracy, in late 18th century, ideology stood for a ‘science of ideas’ (See his ‘*Eléments d'idéologie*’, 1801). The society of ‘ideologists’ at Institut de France which he formed was united by the understanding that our ideas are the necessary consequence of the society in which we live; the group therefore committed to an inquiry of the social production of ideas.

^{iv} I refer to the form of reflective social science initiated by Max Horkheimer in the 1930s and developed at the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung) in Frankfurt, Germany, through a collaboration among himself, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Friedrich Pollock, Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Neumann, Leo Lowenthal, and others. The Institute originated as a Marxist study group and developed into a heterodox school of thought, uniting the diverse research trajectories of its members by an interest in the relationship between history and reason, with a commitment to emancipatory social change.

^v ‘[T]he emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race’, writes Marx in the preamble to the 1880 ‘Programme of the Parti Ouvrier’ (Marx 1880, 376). The often quoted dictum ‘Labor in white skin cannot emancipate itself where the black skin is branded’ is from an 1866 letter Marx writes to François Lafargue; the line is repeated in ‘Capital’ (Marx 1972 [1866], 275; Marx 1967 [1867], 301). The concern with gendered inequities is present also in Marx’s early writings: in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 he argued that women’s position in society could be used as a measure of the development of society as a whole. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944) explore anti-Semitism as the social construction of racial prejudices through which the bourgeoisie enacts its repressed frustrations, which are in turn engendered by the contradictions of capitalism; Erich Fromm (1957) views the authoritarian personality as trapped in a masochistic surrender to a higher power articulated as an exclusive collective identity (e.g. nation or race).

^{vi} For a detailed discussion of the conceptual mechanisms of Ideologiekritik see Azmanova 2012.

^{vii} My critique of the democratic turn in critical social theory dovetails with that offered by Valerie Waldow in her contribution to this volume, where she demonstrates that even a minimalist conception of democracy (as developed within critical approaches to democratic peace theory) can be generalised and essentialised, thereby reproducing the ideological effects a theory sets out to critique.

^{viii} Allen here draws on the work of Michel Foucault to extend the intuitions of the Frankfurt School into a negativistic conception of emancipation; for the purposes of the current analysis, I remain on the territory of the pioneers of Critical Theory.

^{ix} For a clarification of the distinction I draw between, on the one hand, the systemic dynamics (or operational logic) of capitalism – the competitive production of profit and, on the other, the structures through which these

dynamics are enacted (e.g. the institution of the private property of the means of production) see Azmanova 2016 and 2018.

^x Critical Theory inherits Marx's understanding of the 'objectivity' of the social world (the material life-process of society) in contra-distinction to solipsistic, subjective perceptions. That objectivity is enacted in inter-subjective practices through which humans create their world as they make sense of it. The central unit of analysis is practice: the 'practical, human-sensuous activity' (Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', I). Moreover, society is understood holistically, as a system of social relations – the sum of interrelations into which people enter in the course of 'the social production of their existence' (Marx, 'Grundrisse' 1857; 'Preface to the critique of political economy', 1859). The notion of intersubjective practice does not allow for a rigid subject-object divide (see Azmanova 2019a.) For the best substantiated refutation of the move to attribute to Marx an ontology of objectivity see Henry 1983.

^{xi} See Jay (1984) for a detailed discussion of Adorno's ontology of the social as a fractured yet structured totality.

^{xii} The commodification process is also enacted through extra-market mechanisms which Marx termed broadly 'primitive accumulation', which is not just an embryonic stage in capitalist development; it is an ongoing structuring process which mainly takes the forms of physical domination, violence and destruction.

^{xiii} Marx refused to identify himself as a Marxist to the extent that this term came to signify a method of socioeconomic analysis based on abstract laws (Engels, 'Letter to Edward Bernstein', 1882, .

^{xiv} I use the term 'democratic capitalism' to grasp the unity of democracy as a political system and capitalism as a system of social relations that has been typical of the institutionalised social order of the majority of Western societies since forms of representative democracy began to be combined with the competitive production of profit (capitalism's constitute dynamic) sometime in the 18th century.

^{xv} For an alternative understanding of the essential contestability and openness of the concept of democracy see Valerie Waldow's contribution to this volume.

^{xvi} Horkheimer, Adorno, Kirchheimer, and later Marcuse viewed advanced capitalism as politically manipulated and authoritarian capitalism in which the corporatist accumulations of private interests obstruct the formation of genuine democracy, while Pollock and Neumann saw it also as democratic capitalism and an achievement of progressive forces.

^{xvii} It is therefore ironic that Horkheimer had previously opposed the appointment of Habermas as Adorno's assistant in Frankfurt on grounds of Habermas' being too strongly influenced by Marx. Habermas had shaped his early intellectual biography as a Marxist, and was one of the very few openly Marxist academics in the anti-communist West Germany of the 1950s.

^{xviii} I owe this phrase to Azar Dakwar, and I am grateful to him for an enlightening discussion of the way this process plays out in Habermas. My initial view was that Habermas comes to *suspend* both the systematic critique of the political economy of democratic capitalism and the critique of ideology. The functioning of *Ideologiekritik* as ideology construction merits a more careful exploration than the one I am offering here. On this see, for instance, the exchange between J.G Finlayson and D. Cook (Cook 2000; Finlayson 2003; Cook 2003).

^{xix} Nietzsche spoke of the 'democratic prejudice' of the moderns, observing that when we perceive the past through the egalitarian and progressive historiographical self-congratulatory conceits of the present we fail to understand other schemes of values and we miss the chance to understand and reflect on ourselves through them (Nietzsche, 1967 [1887], 28). Here I follow Wendy Brown's interpretation of Nietzsche's term (Brown 2001, 98f.).