

Marx, Cole and the Frankfurt School: realising the political potential of critical social theory

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Abstract

In this article the author proposes that whilst Habermas's attempt to conceptualise a political form oriented towards the institutionalisation of emancipatory practice represents a positive step for critical theory, it is best served by developing a theoretical framework that does not presuppose or apologise for the instrumental mastery of external nature. It is argued that in order to achieve such a task, the political potential of the critique of instrumental reason elaborated by the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists ought to be realised through the labour-mediated reconciliation of humanity with both internal and external nature, and for which the libertarian socialism of G.D.H. Cole provides an adequate basis.

Keywords: critical theory – human emancipation – nature – labour – libertarian socialism

Introduction

The most prominent members of the first generation of Frankfurt School critical theorists (Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse) have explicitly sought to exclude the elaboration of a clearly defined political form from their theoretical frameworks.¹ They have, instead, limited the task of their social critique to a merely diagnostic one. Critical theory, they argued, can only be expected to negate the socio-political institutions causing humanity's domination of itself and external nature. However, with the theoretical developments undertaken by Jürgen Habermas, critical theory came to develop into a theoretical exercise partly aimed at drawing the contours of the democratic processes through which individuals can find the practical means for the emancipation of their internal nature from the repressive mechanisms of “advanced capitalism.” One could indeed find a significant concern with the institutional

arrangement making such a form of emancipation possible as early as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). Critical theory, he thought, should not only seek to identify the emancipatory potentialities inherent in modernity (communicative action), but must also seek to conceptualise the basic institutional framework and the various democratic processes through which they can be realised (the public sphere). It will nevertheless be shown in this article that, by locating democratic decision-making processes outside the sphere of material reproduction, Habermas fell short of elaborating a political form capable of yielding human emancipation. A revisited interpretation of Marx's historical materialist approach will reveal the necessity to re-organise the sphere of material reproduction itself. It will then be shown how and why the libertarian socialism of G.D.H. Cole provides an adequate basis for achieving the latter and realising critical theory's political potential.

Democracy and the reconciliation of humanity and nature

Guiding Habermas's project can be found the notion of control which, as a notion deriving from his concerns with moral autonomy, has significantly shaped the political content of his critical theory. Key to such a content, in fact, is the view that human emancipation is only possible under *democratic control*. Here is how he briefly defined his conception of democracy:

We shall understand democracy to mean the institutionally secured forms of general and public communication that deal with the practical question of how men [sic] can and want to live under the objective conditions of their ever-expanding power of control (Habermas, 1971: 57).

Whilst the development of the productive forces increases humanity's capacity for *technical* control, Habermas contends that it remains an *insufficient* condition for the emancipation of humanity from repression. Indeed as a sphere involving actions oriented towards the efficient *mastery* of external nature, it is thought to fall short of satisfying *all* human needs. Individuals must also be in a position to make decisions regarding the best course of action to follow in order to realise the *common good* or, as Habermas would put it, to answer questions of a *practical* nature. Alongside such a development, therefore, must be secured the institutionalisation of communicative

channels through which the normative concerns related to matters regarding “how men can and want to live” are addressed. Furthermore, since the very idea of emancipation implies that individuals must be in a position to exert control over decisions on matters regarding the common good, decision-making processes ought to assume a democratic form. How, then, does Habermas expect the democratic decision-making processes to perform their emancipatory function alongside the sphere of material reproduction?

According to Habermas’s own theoretical framework, the task facing humanity once it has reached a particular stage in the development of the productive forces, consists in reaching a consensus on “how men can and want to live.” This, in turn, entails that individuals must be in a position to make decisions regarding the *fate* of the technological advances achieved through the technical mastery of the forces of external nature in the “system.” As such, the problem facing modern societies in their quest for complete human emancipation “can [...] be stated as one of the relation between technology and democracy: how can the power of technical control be brought within the range of the consensus of acting and transacting citizens” (Habermas, 1971: 57). A society composed of individuals engaging in successful emancipatory practices is one in which the democratic decision-making processes have brought technological achievements under the rational control of individuals engaging in the various communicative practices found in the “lifeworld” and oriented towards “mutual understanding.” The aim of this consensus consists in defining, intersubjectively, the “*right*” role for technology in the realisation of the common good. Thus, whilst new forms of technologies, such as contraceptive and transportation technologies, constantly develop, it is not until individuals voicing their interests through the various communicative channels available to them have established the *moral* significance of the role of such technologies, that one can begin to speak of human emancipation. Practical matters such as the moral implications of the diffusion of, for example, abortive technologies and petrol-guzzling vehicles hold, according to Habermas, no place in a sphere where actions are governed by the “systemic imperatives” of efficiency and power. The epistemological content of practical questions corresponds, instead, to actions oriented towards the accomplishment of a rational consensus on the definition of the common good and, as such, *strictly* regard matters concerning social integration or, to put it differently, the emancipation of humanity’s own nature. A society failing to accumulate enough socially integrative resources for the development

of the communicative channels required for democratic decision-making processes would, consequently, fail to equip individuals with the means for human emancipation.

As a social form marking the “colonisation” of the sphere of social integration, i.e. the “lifeworld,” by systemic imperatives, the advanced stage of capitalist development effectively brought about a highly significant *democratic deficit*

(Habermas, 1987a; 1988). Indeed, once manipulative relations governed by the principle of efficiency begin to interfere with matters of a practical nature, the latter *lose* their normative character, thereby causing a distortion in communication. As a

“solution” to the problem of the spread of instrumental reason, Habermas (1987a) proposes to harness the reflexive power of communicative reason by mobilising the already existing socially integrative resources and turning them into a buffer against systemic imperatives. Individuals are expected to do so by seizing the various communicative channels at their disposal. A form of communication undistorted by systemic imperatives, itself the precondition for truly democratic decisions, is therefore thought to be possible without altering the sphere of system integration, i.e. material reproduction. In contrast to Marcuse,² then, Habermas believes autonomy to be realisable through democratic decision-making processes standing *alongside* a

“technological rationality” yielded by the capitalist model of production. According to him it is “a question of setting in motion a politically effective discussion that rationally brings the social potential constituted by technical knowledge and ability into a defined and controlled relation to our practical knowledge and will” (Habermas, 1971: 61).

Habermas is here in a position to argue that human emancipation can coexist with

“technological domination” as a result of his epistemological distinction between technical-scientific and practical-normative interests. However, I shall argue that this distinction rests on the fallacious assumption according to which the sphere of material reproduction is thought to exclude orientations of a normative nature.

On the socially integrative function of labour

According to Habermas, a central problem with Marx’s social theory is the fact that the latter locates the “stored up forces of production” at the centre of social evolution (Habermas, 1987b: 29). Their development, Habermas argued, ought to be interpreted as the key driving force identified by Marx behind the transformation of “the

world within which subjects relate to their objects” (Habermas, 1987b: 29). This interpretation of Marx’s materialism does nevertheless fail to fully appreciate the complexity of the dynamics of the socio-economic structure identified by the latter. As one of the most prominent Marxist figures seeking to reveal the embeddedness of structures of legitimation in material reproduction put it:

it is the primacy of the relations of production over the productive forces that gives to their articulation the form of a process of production and reproduction. The productive forces do indeed have materiality of their own that can by no means be ignored; *but they are always organized under given relations of production*. Thus, while the two may enter into contradiction with each other and undergo forms of uneven development, they always do so within a process that stems from the primacy of the relations of production. [emphasis added] (Poulantzas, 1978: 26).

Here Poulantzas reveals that the materiality of society, as Marx himself understood it, cannot be reduced to the forces of production. In fact, we now discover that an accurate understanding of Marx’s materialist stance ought to place a strong emphasis upon the fundamental role played by the organisation of production, i.e. division of labour, property, law, legitimacy, into a class of owners of the means of production imposing its productivist regime onto a class of dispossessed workers, in both the development of the productive forces and society at large. After all, it was Marx who first raised concerns regarding the *direct and causal* relation between the capitalist division of labour and both the unprecedented pace of development of the productive forces and the conditions of existence (exploitation and alienation) that characterise bourgeois societies. By re-assessing the role played by the organisation of production in the development of the productive forces and society at large, one becomes capable of fully appreciating the epistemological status of the so-called “systemic imperatives” (efficiency and productivity) which, as orientations traced back to the emergence of the capitalist division of labour, can no longer be treated as components of a knowledge-constitutive interest of a merely technical kind but, rather, as ones stemming from the lifeworld. Efficiency and productivity not only inform the technical appropriation of the materials of nature, but are also infused with a cultural force informing the value-judgements of individuals communicating with each other and their internal nature, whilst transforming external nature. The truth content of validity claims is therefore assessed according to the normative yardstick framed by the

imperatives of efficiency and productivity, whatever stage within the development of capitalism one seeks to address. The political character of what Marcuse (1955) called “technological domination” cannot, in this sense, be explained in terms of a *subsumption* of a logic of interaction under a formally distinct logic of technical control resulting from the supersession of the separation between the state and the economy, but must *directly* be traced back to a sphere of material reproduction organised around the division of labour (Stockman, 1978: 31). Thus, since “there is no [value-]neutral notion of efficiency and productivity” and, therefore, *no value-neutral material reproduction*, it is possible to argue that Habermas’s distinction between a form of knowledge thought to emanate from the transformation of external nature, and another from intersubjective relations, cannot be upheld (Eyerman and Shipway, 1981: 563; see also Cannon, 2001: 126). As such, efficiency and productivity effectively consist of orientations traced back to a particular manner of organising social life, i.e. as matters concerning “how men can and want to live.”

Having revealed the necessary political and normative character of technology, the task of anticipating decision-making processes that can effectively lead to human emancipation becomes one directed at the nature of those practices located *within* the confines of material reproduction. The solution to the democratic deficit facing modern societies may consist in bringing technical control under the *direct* democratic control of a “political public,” such as the form found in Marx’s own communist vision.

However, here is how Habermas responded to such a proposal:

[T]he reproduction of social life can be rationally planned as a process of producing use-values; society places this process under its technical control. The latter is exercised democratically in accordance with the will and insight of the associated individuals. Here Marx equates the practical insight of a political public with successful technical control. Meanwhile we have learned that even a well-functioning planning bureaucracy with scientific control of the production of goods and services is not a sufficient condition for realizing the associated material and intellectual productive forces in the interest of the enjoyment and freedom of an emancipated society. For Marx did not reckon with the possible emergence at every level of a discrepancy between scientific control of the material conditions of life and a democratic decision-making (Habermas, 1971: 58).

Habermas’s objections are clear. Since material reproduction and democratic decision-making are two spheres of activity corresponding to two distinct

epistemological orientations, the direct control of production by a political public would necessarily entail the conflation of practical matters with those of a technical form, “as though appropriate means were being organized for the realization of goals that are either presupposed without discussion or clarified through communication” (Habermas, 1971: 58). In other words, the nature of production is such that any attempt to bring it under the direct rational control of “associated individuals” will necessarily lead to the formation of a society entirely governed by the imperatives of efficiency and productivity and, consequently, failing to provide the conditions required for human emancipation. According to Habermas, then, the democratic control of industry cannot but produce a society in which the communicative energies required for democratic decision-making are *stifled* by the heavily administered, and therefore repressive, character of its bureaucratic apparatus.

His understanding of a democratic control of material reproduction does nevertheless overlook the possibility of a relationship between humanity and external nature governed by principles of a form different from those currently steering the sphere of labour. Marx’s understanding, however, did not. He had in fact envisaged a concept of labour reaching *beyond* the confines of instrumental reason by predicating it upon humanity’s recognition of itself *as a part of nature* (Marx, 2000b) whilst heavily criticising “centralized State power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature” and praising instead “the emancipation of labour” through the “self-government of the producers” exemplified by the Paris Commune (Marx, 2000c: 584-589). It could therefore be suggested that the prospects of a non-instrumental rational control by producers depend upon the recognition of labour as a process mediating both the transformation of humanity and nature, and upon the corresponding conceptual departure from the productivist model of labour characterising the capitalist and Soviet mode of production. Thus, whilst it is true that Marx failed to “reckon” with the epistemological implications of his concept of labour as self-realisation and the institutional framework corresponding to it, segments of his works provided the conceptual tools with which the relationship between humanity and nature and, consequently, the direct control of industry by producers themselves, could be prevented from assuming a rational-instrumental form.

It was not until the publication of the works of Horkheimer and Adorno that epistemological considerations of a non-instrumental relationship between humanity and nature,³ potentially reconcilable with the concept of labour as self-realisation found

in Marx's works, began to gain ground. Both members of the Frankfurt School, however, have made conscious efforts not to venture into the conceptual elaboration of the institutional framework corresponding to such a relationship, claiming that any such attempts would either be counterproductive or have pernicious effects (Adorno, 1991: 198-203; Horkheimer, 1975: 234). They were nevertheless in agreement with the view according to which matters regarding the transformation of external nature bear a *direct* relevance to the emancipation of humanity's own nature, and for this reason elaborated their critical theory on the more or less implicit assumption that an approach to human emancipation from the standpoint of the reconciliation of humanity and nature, in virtue of its requiring a creative form of activity mediating the former's relationship with both the internal and external form of the latter, entails an autonomous control of those directly involved in such an activity. This is why Horkheimer himself came to suggest that the "system of workers' councils" corresponds to "the theoretical conception which [...] will show the new society its way" (Horkheimer, 1982: 104). Thus, although they have refrained from exploring the alternative institutional framework, their conception of human emancipation – reconciliation of humanity and nature – along with their exploration of the epistemological implications of such a conception – aesthetic rationality – point towards the introduction of a "politically effective discussion" *in* and about labour.

Furthermore, if one accepts the view according to which the "*revolutionary movement negatively reflects the situation which it is attacking*" (Horkheimer, 1982: 99) then one is forced to accept the task of contrasting the existing socio-political institutions (what is) with an alternative institutional model (what it is not). Also, since the aforementioned members of the Frankfurt School all agreed on the repressive character of the advanced capitalist bureaucratic apparatus, they must have also shared the view that any negative reflection on the situation they are attacking would seek to avoid reproducing the conditions leading to such a state of affairs. However, whilst they have all traced the origins of instrumental reason back to the instrumental mastery of external nature, they shared different views regarding the place such a relationship ought to hold in relation to human emancipation. Whereas Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse advocated its total suppression, Habermas insisted that all actions involved in the transformation of external nature were necessarily governed by instrumental reason, thereby defending its existence *alongside* human emancipation. It was nevertheless shown above that Habermas's own democratic model rests on a problematic

“lifeworld/system” differentiation. One could therefore conclude that any attempt to rid society of its repressive character must presuppose the transcendence of “self-preservation,” even *in* the labour process. The autonomous control of industry, which the first generation’s conception of human emancipation more or less implicitly calls forth, must, in this sense, be stripped of all orientations towards forms of efficiency driven by private profit and systematic exploitation. As such, the negative reflection of the situation attacked by the first generation of critical theorists, closely corresponds to the vision contained in the works of guild socialist G.D.H. Cole:

The driving force behind the Guild Socialist movement is a profound belief that man was born for freedom – freedom that shall be full and complete. The bureaucrat, on the other hand, looks at life from the point of view of “efficiency.” What he desires is that the State shall arrange and manage the affairs of its citizens, whether industrial or political, with an eye to extracting the most that machine production can achieve. For him life must be organised by those above for the benefit of those below. His ideal is a bureaucracy masquerading as a democracy (Cole, 1918: 25).

Like the various members of the Frankfurt School – including Habermas – Cole opposed the principles underlying the bureaucratic machine to those upon which democracy is thought to flourish. Although he is here referring to the heavily bureaucratised state-socialist alternative to capitalism, i.e. to a specific institutional model whereby economic affairs are directly managed by the state, a general opposition between orientations towards success and those towards “full and complete freedom” can be identified. As such, it could be suggested that his stance at least partly follows Habermas’s own, for both clearly attacked, and for somewhat similar reasons, the management of economic affairs by the state. However, instead of dismissing *all* forms of direct control in industry as necessarily repressive, and locating autonomy outside the sphere of material reproduction, Cole envisaged an institutional model whereby the “democratic principle” applies “not only or mainly to some special sphere of social action known as ‘politics,’ but to any and every form of social action, and, in especial, to industrial and economic fully as much as to political affairs” (Cole, 1980: 12).

Contra Habermas, then, and in *accordance* with the theoretical implications of the critical theory of the first generation, Cole believed human emancipation to be dependent upon autonomy in labour. Indeed, since the “crowning indictment of capitalism,” he argued, “is that it destroys freedom and individuality in the worker, that

it reduces man to a machine, and that it treats human beings as means to production instead of subordinating production to the well-being of the producer,” one can expect such problems to be solved “only by the workers asserting their freedom and proving their individuality, by their refusing to be regarded as machines, and by their determining to assume *the control of their own life and work*. [My emphasis]” (Cole, 1917: 23). In other words, as long as “industrial autocracy remains unchallenged,” society will fall short of meeting the conditions required for human emancipation (Cole, 1917: 3). By advocating a democratic control of industry, however, Cole is not merely defending a change in the nature of the decision-making processes found in the sphere of material reproduction, but is also calling forth a radical transformation of the relationship between humanity and nature. For the introduction of democracy in industry necessarily entails bidding farewell to instrumental efficiency and productivity. In sum, therefore, whereas Habermas called for a “*mastery*” of the “irrationality of domination” (Habermas, 1971: 61), Cole – as well as the first generation of the Frankfurt School – advocated the latter’s *suppression*. The next section shall explore how Cole envisaged the institutionalisation of democratic decision-making processes suitable for reconciliation of matters regarding “how men can and want to live” with the actions oriented towards the transformation of external nature.

The associative model and emancipatory practice

Whilst Cole was keen to expose and overcome the autocratic nature of the economic system of capitalist societies, he also made frequent and sustained attacks against the form of political organisation such forms of societies entail, namely the capitalist state. Indeed, Cole not only presented the existing “political machine [as] an organ of class domination” resulting in a democratic deficit (Cole, 1980: 122), but also sought to show how the latter was effectively compounded with the growing that the state’s incapacity to deal with the growing complexity of modern societies:

Men found themselves called upon to master the art not of governing the State as it was, but of prescribing for the government of a vast society which changed its basic structure so fast that the magnitude and growing complication of its problems outran hopelessly their capacity to learn the

difficult art of collective control. Under the leadership of science things ran away with men, and the social mind was left groping further and further behind (Cole, 1950: 91).

The inadequacy of the modern state machinery, therefore, cannot be explained merely in terms of interests and class domination. One must indeed turn to the *institutional structure* of the political system supporting capitalist societies in order to grasp fully the causes of their democratic deficit. Cole, then, sought to warn us against the growing incapacity of the modern state to provide an outlet for “collective control.”

The mode of representation at the basis of the state, namely “representative democracy,” has failed, he argued, to realise its emancipatory promises. Instead, and in virtue of the limited control it has been capable of yielding, “representative democracy” has created a state of affairs where individuals “feel lonely in a great crowd unless there is someone to hustle them into herd activity,” thereby making them vulnerable to the influence or control of “the man with the loudest voice, or [...] the loudest loud-speaker and the most efficient propagandist technique” (Cole, 1950: 99). With an institutional structure and mode of representation incapable of accommodating the direct control required for

“a society in which everyone has a chance to count as an individual, and to do something that is distinctively his own” (Cole, 1950: 99) Cole is eventually forced to dismiss the “omnicompetent State, with its omnicompetent Parliament, [as] utterly unsuitable to any really democratic community” (Cole, 1980: 32). For this reason, they

“must be destroyed or painlessly extinguished” (Cole, 1980: 32). It could already be suggested here, then, that in addition to the affinity Wyatt (2006) identified between

Marx’s own political orientations in *The Civil War in France* and Cole’s work, the latter’s libertarian socialism could also be said to constitute a political solution to the problems identified by the Frankfurt School’s thinkers with regards to the various socio-political institutions flourishing under the advanced stage of capitalist development (Schechter, 2005; 2006).

What form, then, would an institutional structure and mode of representation suitable for a truly democratic society assume? If, according to Cole, a central problem with the existing political machine is, in virtue of its “hugeness” and distance from the day-to-day affairs of individuals, its incapacity to give adequate recognition to the particular and ever-changing needs of these same individuals, it must follow that the latter “can control great affairs only by acting together in the control of small affairs, and finding, through the experience of neighbourhood, men whom they can entrust with

larger decisions than they can take rationally for themselves” (Cole, 1950: 94-5). For this reason, the institutional structure of the political sphere must be re-organised into “groups small enough to express the spirit of neighbourhood and personal acquaintance” (Cole, 1950: 94-5). In other words, according to Cole, the problems identified with the existing political life would best be overcome by re-organising it into various *associations*, whose *local* character would serve to maximise each member’s control over the “larger decisions” requiring representation.

Above and beyond the local nature of associations, it is their very *raison d’être* that is instrumental to a key criterion when discussing democracy, namely the maximisation of communication. Since, as Cole further pointed out, the “consciousness of a want requiring co-operative action for its satisfaction is the basis of *association*” (Cole, 1920: 34) the latter effectively serves the direct purpose of giving its members “a chance to count as an individual, and to do something that is distinctively his own” in cooperation with others. Members of each association are, in this sense, united by a common purpose originating from the “translat[ion] of their consciousness of wants into will” (Cole, 1920: 33). Any political representation expected to maximise direct control over decision-making processes must, accordingly, be organised around the *purpose* of each association. However, whilst a re-organisation of the *political* machine’s institutional structure and mode of representation constitutes a necessary step towards the formation of a truly democratic society, it remains, as has already been demonstrated, an insufficient one. As Cole argued:

[...] Society ought to be so organised as to afford the greatest possible opportunity for individual and collective self-expression to all its members, and [...] this involves and implies the extension of positive self-government *through all its parts* [My emphasis] (Cole, 1980: 13).

Cole, then, effectively sought to give life to liberal ideas of autonomy (the possible) without reproducing conditions of existence causing “individual self-expression” to develop into self-preservation (the actual). In order to achieve such a task, he argued, the sphere of *material reproduction* itself cannot be excluded from a re-organisation of its institutional structure into associations. The task, here, as Cole suggested, is to “reintroduce into industry the communal spirit” required for the creation of conditions favourable for “self-expression,” and therefore direct control (Cole, 1980: 46). With the market forces under the control of individuals organised into associations,

and a mode of political representation aimed at defending the interests of the various members in each association, one can begin to catch a glimpse of the contours of an institutional framework capable of giving human emancipation in all the relevant aspects of social life its due. It could therefore be argued that Cole's institutional framework realises the political potential of critical theory in such a way as to provide a basis upon which the *fossé* between the actual and the possible, which the first generation of the Frankfurt School insisted on revealing, can be overcome.

One is nevertheless justified in asking, here, how Cole expected the political sphere to relate to its economic counterpart? Or, to put it differently, how did Cole envisage the various associations to interact with one another in such a way as to form a coherent whole? In order to provide an answer, one ought to turn to the purpose of associations. As was discovered above, the members of each association are united by a common purpose which constitutes the purpose of the association itself. According to Cole, "[e]very such purpose or groups of purposes is the basis of the *function* of the association which has been called into being for its fulfilment" (Cole, 1920: 49). Thus, in virtue of its seeking to realise a specific purpose, every association is said to perform a particular function. The latter, which Cole also described as "the underlying principle of *social organisation*" shall therefore serve as a basis for the *political* representation of the interests of the various individuals organised into *economic* and *civic* associations (Cole, 1920: 48). Cole summed up the advantages of the principle of function as follows:

Due performance by each association of its social function [...] not only leads to smooth working and coherence in social organisation, but also removes the removable social hindrances to the "good life" of the individual. In short, function is the key not only to "social," but also to communal and personal well-being (Cole, 1920: 62).

With an institutional framework composed of political, economic and civic associations, the principle of efficiency underpinning the various institutions composing advanced capitalist societies and causing the spread of the "social hindrances" to the "good life,"⁴ would be substituted with the principle of function whose general impact on the various domains of social life shall consist in providing a cohesive basis upon which "the creative, scientific and artistic impulses which capitalism suppresses or perverts" can flourish, "and to enable the now stifled civic spirit to work wonders in the

regeneration of human taste and appreciation of the good things in life” (Cole, 1980: 115-6). Above all, then, and in virtue of their *localised*, *cooperative* and *functional* character, associations provide individuals with the organisational means to gain control over the various political, economic and civic processes currently in the hands of the state and the market, whilst ensuring that the *self-realisation* ensuing therefrom assumes a *socially cohesive* character.

In order to grasp the full range of mechanisms making the aforementioned alignment possible, one ought to turn to one of Cole’s main inspirations, namely Rousseau’s social and political thought. What attracted Cole to Rousseau was above all the latter’s concern with the riddle of the relationship between individual interests and the common good, which the French thinker claimed to have solved in his concept of the “general will.” Despite the now well-known problems associated with this famous concept,⁵ it was the fact that “it put right at the heart of social thought the notion of *will*, rather than so passive a notion of ‘consent’ or so objectionable a notion as obedience of the subject to the commands of a superior” that led Cole to develop such an admiration for Rousseau (Cole, 1950: 113-4). It was, as Cole himself put it, a “special kind of will” for the following reasons:

He [Rousseau] was insisting that men, whenever they form or connect themselves with any form of association for any active purpose, develop in relation to the association an attitude which looks to the general benefit of the association rather than their own individual benefit. This is not to say that they cease to think of their own individual advantage – only that there is, in their associative actions, an element, which may be stronger or weaker, of seeking the advantage of the whole association, or of all its members, as distinct from the element which seeks only personal advantage (Cole, 1950: 114).

Cole, therefore, was not effectively seeking to establish whether Rousseau has successfully solved the aforementioned riddle but was merely interested in the manner in which the latter sought to solve it. He discovered that by placing his emphasis on the notion of will in associative actions, Rousseau had been able to expose the mechanisms whereby one *actively* seeks to realise the purpose of the association (or common good). The development of this “attitude which looks to the general benefit of the association rather than their own individual benefit” could only be possible wherever individuals become conscious of the fact that the satisfaction of a want requires involvement in cooperative action for, under such conditions the association, although effectively

embodying a will of a different kind to the will of each individual, turns the common good into an *extension* of the good life of each individual. An institutional framework making it possible for individuals to act *in accordance with their will* would, in this sense, create the conditions for the development of social solidarity into a sentiment and, ultimately, turn the common good (or purpose of each association) into a project which the members of associations could all actively and personally commit to. As such, social solidarity is said to be experienced as a “strong impulsion” (Cole, 1950: 128) or “primitive social impulse that has been overlaid by bad institutions, but not destroyed” (Cole, 1950: 129), and whose release would be made possible by the re-organisation of economic and political life into associations.

It should now become clearer how and why the associative model elaborated by Cole could provide solutions to the problems identified by the members of the Frankfurt School. It could be argued that in order to create the conditions favourable for human emancipation as the reconciliation of humanity with both external nature and itself, the institutional framework must be engineered in such a way as to strip material reproduction and political life of instrumental reason and allow “sentiment” to become “a force in the shaping of human affairs,” or, to use Habermas’s own terms, a force shaping decisions regarding “how men can and want to live” (Cole, 1950: 128). It is with this particular concern in mind that Cole sought to actualise the good life – composed of both practical and technical orientations – in his associative model, an actualisation that, according to him, cannot be limited to a re-organisation of the sphere of production, but should also be extended to consumption as well. The next section shall both present his reasons for arguing so and further demonstrate how Cole’s libertarian socialism effectively serves the realisation of critical theory’s political potential.

Production, Consumption and Dialogue

Conceptualisations of alternative societal models aimed at overcoming the problems associated with the capitalist mode of production have, as a result of the predominance of orthodox Marxist perspectives, favoured and even prioritised the democratic control of production by workers. As Marx himself had discovered, private property and the wage-system that ensued therefrom have turned the act of labour, and

therefore the labourer himself, into a means for the accumulation of capital, thereby causing the subservience of the vast majority of individuals composing society to the economic system. Human emancipation, it was thought, could only be expected to flourish on a societal scale once the sphere of material reproduction has been reorganised in such a way as to rid the system of production of its alienating, exploitative, and generally oppressive character.⁶ This is precisely why, in *The Civil War in France*, one can find Marx defending the “self-government of the producers” exemplified by the Paris Commune, but also the reason why conceptualisations of alternative societal models inspired by Marx’s works have placed such a strong emphasis on the radical reorganisation of the system of production.

However, whilst such visions of a truly emancipated society include detailed analyses of the relation between individuals and labour, they have tended to neglect the role of consumption in self-realisation, and to theorise it as a dimension of internal nature. Indeed, whereas, for example, Marx himself was conscious of the inhuman character of the general process (production and consumption) of the satisfaction of needs,⁷ he did not seek to present the sphere of consumption as one capable of developing its own repressive mechanisms, and therefore as one necessitating a distinct analytical emphasis. He therefore did not ask himself whether the individual would indeed succeed in finding the means for emancipation in consumption, for he believed it was sufficient to demonstrate that a failure to achieve self-realisation through labour would necessarily prevent society at large from acquiring the means to attain human emancipation. It could nevertheless be argued that by locating the crux of his critique of political economy in production, Marx effectively failed to anticipate the key role consumption would eventually come to play in the advanced stage of capitalist development. Indeed, not only has the latter sphere, as Habermas (1974) argued, become central to the production of value, it has also, as the first generation of critical theorists demonstrated, come to perform a key function in repression.

When one engages with the works of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, one cannot but appreciate the significance and complexity of the repressive mechanisms found in the sphere of consumption embodying a system such as the “culture industry.”. Under an age of “mass culture,” they argued, one ought to expose the conditions under which individuals “as producers *and* consumers” experience the principle of self-preservation brought about by the capitalist mode of production (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 120). Under the pressure of a hostile and competitive environment

yielding conditions of existence under which individuals can only be expected to “cope[...] most proficiently with the facts” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 83), individuals as producers are forced to abandon any hope for self-realisation in labour, and ultimately seek refuge in a sphere where they expect to find the pleasure and comfort denied in production by what the first generation of critical theorists referred to as “self-preservation” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). The latter, therefore, is said to engender a “longing for a ‘feeling on safe grounds’” which, combined with the search for pleasure, turns individuals as consumers into agents immediately responsive even to the most superficial and incomplete of instinctual releases (Adorno, 1991: 161). They are, for this reason, most responsive to a system – such as the culture industry – relying precisely on those “psycho-dynamic” mechanisms making possible the *effortless* and *non-reflexive* experience of pleasure, i.e. a form of pleasure that is not experienced as a process of self-realisation involving both sensuous and cognitive faculties, i.e. a form of satisfaction that does not really satisfy. However, since such a system, by professing the attainment of pleasure *whilst* thriving on the feeling of insecurity generated by self-preservation and complying with the logic of efficient capital accumulation, effectively limits the experience of the consumers of culture to one of “adjustment and unreflecting obedience” (Adorno. 1991: 163), it ultimately falls short of fulfilling its very own promises:

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 139).

By restricting the consumers’ experience to the domains of “fun” and “entertainment,” the films, music and other cultural artefacts supplied by the culture industry become incapable of supplying the cultural forms making it possible for individuals to engage in sustained self-gratification, also known as the sublimation of instincts. Instead, the culture industry tends “to ensnare the consumer as completely as possible and in order to engage him psycho-dynamically in the service of pre-meditated effects” (Adorno, 1991: 166). Consequently:

The man with leisure has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him. Kant's formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but industry robs the individual of this function. Its prime service to the customer is to do the schematizing for him. Kant said that there was a secret mechanism in the soul which prepared directly intuitions in such a way that they could be fitted into the system of pure reason. But today that secret has been deciphered. While the mechanism is to all appearances planned by those who serve up the data of experience, that is, by the culture industry, it is in fact forced upon the latter by the power of society, which remains irrational, however we may try to rationalize it; and this inescapable force is processed by commercial agencies so that they give an artificial impression of being in command. There is nothing left for the consumer to command. Producers have done it for him (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997: 125).

Under the control of psycho-dynamic mechanisms aimed at attracting as wide an audience as possible, drawing their manipulative force from the divorce between reason and the senses,⁸ and addressing themselves mainly to the latter, individuals effectively *lose control* over the release of their instinctual energies. However, since the “desublimation” of instinctual energies resulting therefrom means that individuals remain in a position to experience *instant* forms of gratification, the latter fail to call into question the hostile and manipulative environment surrounding them. In sum, therefore, whilst the pleasure the culture industry constantly promises in advertising campaigns and marketing strategies must under such circumstances remain an illusion, the control sought by individuals over the choices made in the sphere of consumption becomes no less illusory. Under the advanced stage of capitalist development, then, individuals fail to emancipate themselves not only as producers but *also* as consumers.

Once the central function played in repression by the psycho-dynamic mechanisms found in the sphere of consumption⁹ has been exposed, it becomes the task of the critical theorist to explore the conditions under which such a sphere, along with material reproduction, can serve the realisation of the good life where each person develops their own vision that is no longer interpreted in terms of functional competence or success in capital accumulation. As such, any attempt to conceptualise an alternative institutional model aimed at creating the conditions favourable for emancipation must be directed at the two spheres. It is with such concerns in mind that Cole elaborated his associative model:

[T]he only way in which industry can be organised in the interests of the whole community is by a system in which the right of the producer to *control* production and that of the consumer to *control* consumption are recognised and established [My emphasis] (Cole, 1917: 281).

Whilst Cole was conscious of the fact that because the worker “does not find his job interesting or pleasurable [he] seeks his pleasure outside it, in his hours of leisure” (Cole, 1957: 16) he was clearly aware of the fact that “the decision of the character and use of the product is clearly a matter primarily for the user” and cannot therefore “remain in the hands of outsiders” such as market forces or, more concretely, the “commercial agencies” (Cole, 1917: 106-7). Thus, democratic control must be exercised in both production and consumption.

Cole’s concern with consumption could, at this point, be said to reveal a significant *affinity and complementarity* between his libertarian socialist institutional framework and the critical theory of the earlier generation of the Frankfurt School. Indeed, whilst Adorno and Horkheimer merely sought to reveal the mechanisms at work in the repression of individuals *qua* consumers, Cole provided the theoretical foundations upon which the emancipation of these individuals from repression could be conceptualised and translated into practice. As such it could be suggested that, to put it in terms echoing the views of Frankfurt School thinkers, Cole effectively treated *consumption as a central dimension to the emancipation of internal nature* from the psycho-dynamic mechanisms causing individuals to experience repressive forms of desublimation. Such a concern for consumption, then, marks a significant departure from previous attempts to institutionalise emancipatory practice. By restricting the scope of its concerns to the conditions of existence experienced by individuals *qua* workers, the Marxist orthodoxy had locked itself into a somewhat narrowly defined and pernicious vision of a society where the invisible hand of the free market would be substituted with the all-too-visible and autocratic rule of planners, whose role would consist in the highly challenging task of satisfying the needs of society at large. Under such an institutional framework, individuals *qua* consumers would lose all control over the *definition of their needs*, thereby failing to find the conditions of existence required for autonomous self-realisation. The conceptual elaboration of an alternative vision aimed at turning human emancipation into a reality must, therefore, *also* give recognition to the role played by consumption in the realisation of the good life. Indeed, as Cole put it, “[i]f the good life is a blend of satisfactions achieved from consumption

and satisfactions achieved from successful creation, the only answer [...] is that men themselves must decide collectively what blending of these elements they like best”

(Cole, 1950: 97). One can further appreciate the relevance of such a sphere to self-realisation once the changing nature of the capitalist mode of production is accounted for. Indeed, as has been demonstrated above, individuals have, as a result of the alienating nature of the wage-system and the division of labour, turned to the sphere of consumption for self-realisation. Thus, a reorganisation of consumption into democratic associations would not only give the role of consumption in self-realisation its due, it would also serve to overcome the more recent and increasingly complex forms of repression¹⁰ found at the advanced stage of capitalist development, thereby allowing individuals *qua* consumers to exert control over the definition of their needs and opening up an horizon of possibilities for the sensuous objectivity of nature to be expressed in the definition of those needs.

One is nevertheless justified in asking, at this point, how individuals organised into such associations would come to harmonise their individual plans of action. In other words, whilst it may seem immediately clear why one individual can best be emancipated in an association, it remains difficult to grasp how human emancipation could be achieved cohesively on a societal scale. In order to answer such a question, one must first turn to the very *raison d'être* of an association. If, as Cole suggested, one enters into an association following the consciousness of a “want requiring co-operative action for its satisfaction,” one can immediately appreciate the continuity between the good life of the individual members and the good of the association as a whole. The purpose of each association, therefore, is pursued by its members as their own. However, in order to ensure the completion of the process of satisfaction of needs, the producers must be in a position to know the quantity and quality of goods and services to be supplied, and the consumers in a position to communicate their needs. With such a concern in mind, Cole envisaged the introduction of a *dialogue* between the various associations. Once associations of producers enter into a dialogue with the associations of consumers, the members of the respective associations would be in a position to defend the interest of the association as their own *and* “negotiate on equal terms” (Cole, 1917: 86). Dialogue would, as a result, turn the satisfaction of needs into a process capable of maximising “the freedom of the producer as well as the consumer” (Cole, 1917: 302). With the invisible hand of the free market replaced by a dialogical relationship between a supply side and a demand side organised into democratic

associations of producers and consumers respectively, one thus gains an insight into the institutional framework in which the process of satisfaction of needs is *directly shaped* by decisions regarding “how men can and want to live.”

Concluding remarks

The various members of the first generation of critical theorists, on the whole, agreed with each other regarding the *dependence* of the emancipation of internal nature upon the process whereby external nature is transformed. They have nevertheless fallen short of providing an *insight* into the institutional structure within which the set of social relations required for human emancipation could develop. As such, Habermas’s attempt to address the institutionalisation of the reconciliation of humanity and nature and to treat it as a matter *strictly* regarding the relationship between humanity and itself marks a significant departure from the earlier generation. However, by locating democratic decision-making processes outside the sphere of material reproduction, and rejecting both the desirability and possibility of an alternative relationship between humanity and external nature, he fell short of elaborating a political form potentially capable of providing individuals with the practical means for the democratic expression “how they can and want to live.” What I have therefore sought to achieve in this article is to realise the political potential of critical theory by reconciling the prescriptive *character* of Habermas’s own theoretical orientations with the approach to human emancipation as the reconciliation of humanity with *both* internal and external nature defended by the first generation of critical theorists. In order to do so, I have attempted to expose the *elective affinity* between the associative model of democracy elaborated by G.D.H. Cole and the form of emancipatory practice defended by Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, whilst revealing that the self-government of individuals consists in, as Marx himself put it, “the political form [...] under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour” (Marx, 2000c: 589).

Notes

¹ Marcuse and Fromm did somehow anticipate alternative conditions of existence : the aesthetic form for the former (Marcuse, 1969), and a system where the individual actively “participates in the social process” in such a way as to make the “active and spontaneous realization of the self” possible, for the latter (Fromm, 2002: 237).

² In *One-dimensional Man* (1955), Marcuse revealed the political character of “technological rationality,” and called for a “new” technology.

³ The reconciliation of humanity and nature such a relationship entails is, as Held put it, “implied” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Held, 1980: 157).

⁴ Such “social hindrances” include phenomena such as competition, alienation, the division of labour, class inequalities, bureaucracy, the wage-system etc.

⁵ Habermas himself has charged Rousseau for failing to solve the above riddle: “Even Rousseau’s democratic conversion of the sovereignty of the prince into that of the people did not solve the dilemma. Public opinion was in principle opposed to arbitrariness and subject to the laws immanent in a public composed of critically debating persons in such a way that the property of being the supreme will, superior to all laws, which is to say sovereignty, could strictly speaking not be attributed to it at all” (Habermas, 1989: 82).

⁶ Such a stance can be found in conceptualisations ranging from the state socialism of Lenin to the anarcho-communism of Mikhail Bakunin.

⁷ Marx did indeed argue that as a result of the inhuman character of production, the consumer is prevented from experiencing the “enjoyment or use of [the producer’s] product [as] the direct enjoyment of realising that [the producer] had both satisfied a human need by [his] work and also objectified the human essence and therefore fashioned for another human being the object that met his need” (Marx, 2000d: 132).

⁸ It is on this separation that the psycho-dynamic mechanisms rely, for it allows them to stimulate a reason-free, and therefore unrestrained, release of instinctual energies. Instinctual energies are here therefore said to be desublimated.

⁹ It must be noted here that whereas the earlier generation of critical theorists were particularly concerned with one dimension of consumption, namely culture, Cole’s works addressed the phenomenon of consumption as a whole. What is of particular interest here, however, is way they all sought to depart from the restricted emphasis on production found in conventional Marxist critiques, and approach human emancipation (and the various mechanisms hindering it) as a phenomenon also concerning consumption.

¹⁰ The contemporary relevance of these forms of repression was shown by Steinert in his work entitled *Culture Industry* (2003). In it, Steinert provides several contemporary examples, such as the Princess Diana phenomenon or Woody Allen films, arguing that they are but a few clear illustrations of “the insulting diet of trash that seduces us with a false promise of pleasure that is never realized.” (Steinert, 2003: 5).

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