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## **Metacritical Observations on a Reductive Approach to Critical Theory: Ruane and Todd's "The Application of Critical Theory"**

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### **Introduction**

In the previous volume of *Political Studies*<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd published an essay in which they seek to direct a methodological argument against critical theory. Since I am often taken to be a representative of critical theory,<sup>2</sup> although my self-understanding is somewhat more complex than is presupposed by such an -- admittedly not altogether wrong -- imputation, I cannot forego this opportunity to point out some difficulties in their argument and to make some suggestions as to a more consistent elaboration. In addition, I must confess that I am by no means uninterested in methodological and, more broadly, epistemological issues. To be as to the point as possible, I propose to make observations on their essay in three areas: the position assumed by the authors, the basic concepts they employ in the presentation of this position, and the nature of the object of their critique.

Before embarking on a development of my essentially metacritical observations, however, I wish to express my appreciation for the willingness of the authors to take a general methodological position and thus to open the way for debate and hence the overcoming of the debilitating isolationism which, in my experience, is characteristic of a significant part of Irish academic life.

### **From Application to Verification**

As regards the general argument of Ruane and Todd, it must be emphasized at the outset that whereas they announce that the essay is intended to focus on the problem of the application of critical theory, it is in fact devoted less to this problem than to that of verification. It would be worth our while, I think, to investigate this -- I suspect reductive -- move somewhat more closely.

The problem of the "application of critical theory to the practical world" (553),<sup>3</sup> to begin with, is a rather complex one which basically concerns the question of the normative foundations of the social sciences or, more specifically, the re-establishment of a relation between the social sciences and practical philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Judging from the writings of the last two decades which raise objections to critical theory, the problem of application has a least four dimensions:<sup>5</sup>

- 1 the methodological dimension to which is central the question of the relation between norms and facts, which is often discussed in terms of the lack or not of value-freedom and objectivity;
- 2 the hermeneutic dimension concerning the question of the content of practical principles, which is usually articulated under the titles of formalism and dogmatism;
- 3 the social theoretic dimension involving the question of the rational organisation of society, which is as a rule confronted with such problems as terror, anarchy and refeudalization; and finally

- 4 the philosophical dimension to which is central the question of grounding or justification, which is frequently considered from the point of view of foundationalism.

Ruane and Todd's conception of the problem of application is a variety of (1) above. What is remarkable, however, is that they do not follow the usual line of criticizing the obliteration of the distinction between facts and norms in critical theory. In fact, they seem to accept the legitimacy of the normative or, more specifically, the political and emancipatory orientation of critical theory -- a step that can be applauded. The thrust of their methodological objection, concentrating on the factual pole as it does, rather consists of a demand that critical theory qua theory requires to be "empirically grounded and validated" (533; also 536, 537, 538) "through a closer relationship with empirical data" (537).

In a sense, this demand of theirs is a trivial one. The leading critical theorists are well aware of the circumstance that since the normative foundations of critical theory<sup>6</sup> do not guarantee the truth and objectivity of social scientific statements or propositions, immanent procedures and concrete analyses are and will remain a basic requirement of critical theoretical social scientific practice. Taking experience seriously as they do, they moreover know perfectly well that one cannot doubt the testability of empirical statements unless one is also willing to deny the possibility of experience itself. Given this recognition on the part of the critical theorists, however, I suspect that Ruane and Todd's demand is the outcome of a misunderstanding, admittedly also to be found among lesser representatives of critical theory, of the status of the practical principle that provides the normative foundation of critical theory. To put it as concisely as possible, they mistakenly assume that the practical principle of critical theory represents not only the necessary but also the sufficient criterion for the rationality of discourses and forms of life which is applied independently of the understanding and evaluation of concrete situations. Critical theorists, by contrast, bring additional criteria into play through immanent procedures and concrete analyses in order to fulfil the sufficient conditions of critical theoretical social scientific practice.<sup>7</sup> The crucial issue, therefore, is how the immanent procedures and concrete analyses (as well as the experience involved) are to be understood.

Although the title of Ruane and Todd's essay conjures up the image of a Popperian position, it soon becomes apparent that in strategic respects the authors assume a cruder what may be called inductivist-verificationist position. It is from this point of view that one must understand their conception of immanent procedures and concrete analyses. I find support for the proposed interpretation of their general position in the stance they take on a whole range of issues. Let me mention the most important instances: First, the authors indeed defer to post-empiricist philosophy of science, particularly the Popperian principle of the theory-impregnatedness of observation (537), yet their emphasis on the dependence of theory on observation (536, 537, 538) comes through still stronger, indeed to such an extent that it becomes clear that, despite all appeal to dialectics, they ultimately conceive of the relation between theory and research in inductive terms. Secondly, they operate with a conception of social reality which displays an ontological prejudice shared by all the representatives of positivism as well as by Popper to a certain extent: they repeatedly speak of reality as consisting of "observable events and processes" (537), which means to say, in a manner that emphatically excludes the problem of meaning and its expression by human beings and their creations or products.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, the authors

consistently yet mistakenly employ the Manichean view of the separation of theory and empirical research reminiscent of positivism in its heyday as a principle for the interpretation not only of the development of the philosophy of the social sciences, including the Positivist Dispute of the late 1960s (537), but also of critical theory itself (533, 536, 537). In the fourth place, they operate with a conception of theory (e.g. 538) which is devoid of any appreciation of the connection between theory and background knowledge in the sense of a historically changing cognitive situation which fulfils something like a transcendental function.<sup>9</sup> Fifthly, the authors exhibit a tendency, typical of positivism, towards the reduction of genuine epistemological issues, such as the theory-impregnatedness of observation or the constitution of the object of study, to methodological or even "practical" -- in the sense of research technical -- problems, while nevertheless advancing a covert epistemological position, namely that the goal of science is the building of "empirically grounded and validated theory" (538), with -- to be sure -- a very specific sense attaching to "theory". Finally, the general inductivist-verificationist position assumed by the authors is conclusively betrayed by their emphatic concern with "empirical grounding" (533, 536, 537, 538) which could have meaning only within the context of the positivistic commitment to the truth function of basic observation statements relative to a reality consisting of singular states of affairs (i.e. "observable events and processes").

Thus far I have endeavoured to draw out the presuppositions on which Ruane and Todd proceed in their methodological critique in order to show that their position entails a narrowing down of the problem of application to such a degree that a reductive and hence distortive approach to critical theory necessarily follows. At this stage, it becomes necessary to be somewhat more specific.

### **The Inadequacy of Some Basic Concepts Exposed**

One of the curious aspects of Ruane and Todd's essay resides in the fact that it breaks down in terms of its own most basic criterion, i.e. the methodological stipulation that the requirement of empirical reference must at all times be observed. It proceeds on the -- dare I say theoretical? -- assumption that, despite the concern of the critical theorists with practical relevance, their work is essentially "theoretical and remote from concrete issues and problems" (533). Later on, I will consider this position more meticulously from a methodological point of view, but for the moment I wish only to signal my astonishment and to point out that the authors are able to advance this claim only on the basis of a failure<sup>10</sup> to take into account the concrete analyses undertaken by the critical theorists, some of which have lost little of their significance, in such areas as the economy, politics, the state, law, social psychology, the family, art and the mass media. I suspect, however, that this failure rests less on the obvious unfamiliarity of our authors with the corpus of critical theoretical writings than on more pervasive and less easily corrigible difficulties. As intimated earlier, I take these to hang together with an all too narrow concept of empirical reality and an equally inadequate concept of theory.

I have already drawn attention to Ruane and Todd's restricted ontology. At this juncture it is necessary to underline that this prejudicial position implies that for them there is only one world, the self-sufficient external world, and only one correct social scientifically relevant empirical reality, consisting of observable events and processes. Corresponding to this empirical reality, they moreover envisage an "empirically oriented" methodology with focuses on facts and regularities. Although a gesture is made towards recognizing the "critical and theoretical standards" (533) of

critical theory and hence its "practical political relevance" (534),<sup>11</sup> our authors' demotion of epistemological issues to methodological or even research technical ones, mentioned above, renders them incapable of appreciating that, instead of there being one correct empirical reality, reality is actually empirically constituted by the subject of knowledge and thus by the same token socially constructed, with the result that there are not only different types of empirical reality depending on the rules according to which it is constituted or constructed, but also correspondingly different methodologies. Consequently, what to the critical theorists is an eminently empirical matter, such as interpretable features of symbolically constructed reality (e.g. music, art, a philosophical system, poetry, etc.) or hidden features of the organisation of social relations (e.g. domination covered over by ideology or even fragmentation), appears to the authors not as something empirical at all but rather as mere theory in the sense of pure and hopeless speculation: "We are dealing, therefore, with theory constructed largely within the domain of theory whose relationship to concrete social and historical processes has yet to be established" (536). Here, to be sure, we witness the most basic misunderstanding of critical theory by Ruane and Todd. Failing to appreciate the empirical reality the critical theorists have in mind, they forcibly transpose it into what they regard as the theoretical domain, yet a domain in turn understood in a sense that makes it obvious from a critical theoretical point of view that here also an all too narrow vision projects correspondingly restrictive horizons. It must be recognized, by contrast, that not only is theory as variable as the types of empirical reality that can be constituted, but being connected to an all-pervasive background knowledge in the form of a historically changeable cognitive situation, it is continually subject to change so as to remain adequate to its object, historically changing societal reality. The crucial point from the perspective of critical theory, moreover, is that theory is not just something about reality, as is assumed by Ruane and Todd, but theory is in fact part and parcel of reality itself. I bet our authors will have difficulty understanding or accepting statements which bring to the fore this state of affairs, such as for example the following:

"I am convinced that reflection, even when it is theoretical, on the structural components of new movements plays an important role in the growth of collective action". (Alberto Melucci)

"It must be stated quite openly that the purpose of this (sociological - P. S.) research work is to contribute to the development of social movements.... Our real objective is to enable society to live at the highest possible level of historical action instead of blindly passing through crises and conflicts... I plan to construct the theory of social movements, in the conviction that my theoretical work will have the reflex effect of helping those collective actions to take shape..." (Alain Touraine)

and finally:

"A critical theory of society has the task of developing enlightening situational interpretations which have a bearing on our self-understanding and orient us in our action". (Jürgen Habermas)

Against this backdrop it comes as a surprise to see the positions of Adorno and Habermas being criticized for being "theoreticist" (537, 537 footnote) and not

"dialectical" (536, 537). For Ruane and Todd, not the critical theorists, are the ones who clearly operate with an undialectical position which from a certain point of view may even be called theoreticist. Support for this is to be found in their rejection of the employment of critical theory "as a means for the understanding of society" (536) as being a "simple application" (538) in favour of applying it in the sense of empirical verification with a view to "theory-building itself" (538): rather than assuming a dialectical position which relates theoretical and substantive issues for the purposes of furthering the understanding of society, theory becomes a goal in itself in a manner it would never do for a critical theorist. Ultimately, however, this concern with theory-building rests on what we in imitation of Ruane and Todd's neologism may call a "methodoligicist" tendency. Adorno offers an admirable description of it in one of the works reviewed by our authors:

"Not for nothing -- and quiet rightly as far as the logic of scientific procedures under discussion is concerned -- in discussion of empirical social research do question of method outweigh substantive questions. As a criterion the dignity of the objects to be examined is frequently replaced by the objectivity of the findings which are to be ascertained by means of a method .... The pretence is made to examine an object by means of an instrument of research, which through its own formulation, decides what the object is".<sup>12</sup>

What must be insisted upon, therefore, is that a position operating with a conception of the empirical in the sense of the factual dimension can be dialectical, if at all, only in a rather partial or selective sense. Simply witness Ruane and Todd's concept of dialectics. A truly dialectical position is one that conceives of the empirical with reference to the societal context as a whole, as suggested earlier. This is the mark of critical theory, on the one hand, and on the other precisely what our authors find impossible to grasp. For them it is merely a matter of a "simple application", whatever that is meant to convey. The basic problem with Ruane and Todd's position, in my opinion, is that they accept the distinction between the theoretical and the empirical, and then seek to establish a so-called "dialectical" relation between them in order to break, first, the primacy of theory over data in favour of an "equal emphasis" (536) on both, and, secondly, the deductive relation between theory and research in favour of instituting an inductive one instead.<sup>13</sup>

A final matter I wish to touch on before leaving the topic of basic concepts is what Ruane and Todd repeatedly refer to as "empirical grounding and validity" (533, 536, 537, 538) -- a concept absolutely fundamental to their position. From a philosophical point of view, the expression "empirical grounding" appears problematic in that it glibly brings together matters which do not easily mix. At any rate, it is clear that at best it is but a version of the naturalistic fallacy. Given the formula-like manner in which it is employed throughout the essay, I suspect that it represents a construct that is yet to be thought through. I therefore challenge the authors to develop this concept in order to clarify their position. If they choose to persist in pursuing a naturalistic epistemological-methodological line of thought, clear guidelines can be had from the realist philosophy of science represented by such authors as Rom Harré, Roy Bhaskar, Keat and John Urry.<sup>14</sup> Considering the fact that the debate between critical theory and scientific realism has yet to take place, work along these lines could indeed turn out to be worthwhile. An alternative -- and in my view a potentially more fruitful -- route, however, would roughly require the following steps: starting from the contradictory contemporary concept of the

empirical, and attending throughout to the cognitive structures of the alternative (i.e. statistical-administrative and monographic-critical) orientations, reconstruct historically and theoretically the development of modern social research. This exercise would eventually make clear the internally differentiated nature of the social-epistemological construction or constitution of empirical reality and of the theoretical-methodological approaches to it. If the authors follow this latter, admittedly more arduous route, it would sooner or later dawn on them that to make the specific demand of critical theory they do is tantamount to imposing an inappropriate (empiricist-inductivist) cognitive ideal on an enterprise with its own distinct and carefully constructed (critical-hermeneutical) cognitive ideal. And as Adorno writes,<sup>15</sup> one would have to respond to this kind of reductive demand that it

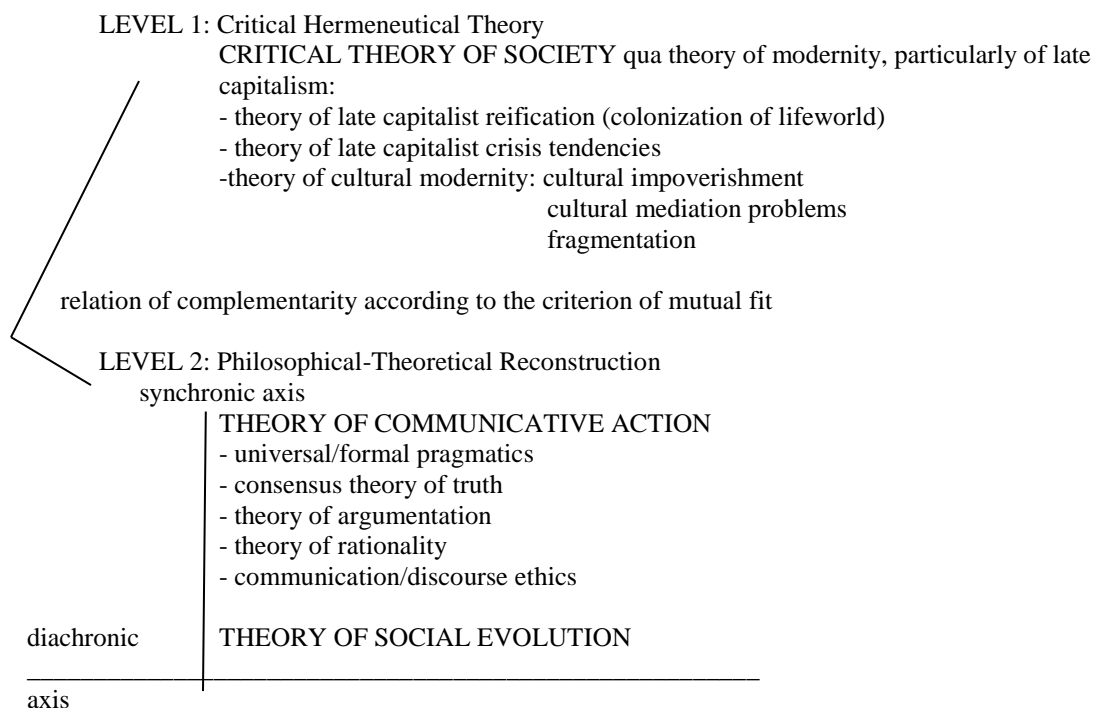
"projects onto objects the desire for order which marks a classifying science, and which proclaims that it is elevated by objects. The author, however, feels more inclined to give himself over to objects than to schematize like a schoolmaster -- for the sake of an external standard: a standard which, questionably, has been brought to bear on the subject matter from the outside".

### **Disregard for the Dignity of the Object of Critique**

In this final section, I want to document the fact that Ruane and Todd severely underestimate the complexity of their object of critique, critical theory, particularly in the form given to it by Habermas.

In their overview of critical theory, the authors indeed make a distinction between Habermas' theory of modernity, on the one hand, and his theories of ethics and social evolution, on the other. At the same time, they apparently also recognize the difference in the methodological status of these theories, i.e. the latter two being reconstructive theories which "inform and partially justify" the former theory (534). Although neither the specific differences nor the relations between the two types of theories are spelled out in detail, the overview nevertheless leads the reader to expect that appropriate conclusions would be drawn from the structure of critical theory for the purposes of the main argument. This expectation is disappointed, however, in that there appears to be a discrepancy between the authors' presentation and their understanding of critical theory. As a consequence, their critique is not sufficiently differentiated to be cogent and convincing. To clarify my argument, let me give a rough diagrammatic breakdown of the components of Habermas' position and then align Ruane and Todd's critique with it (see diagram below).

## THE STRUCTURE OF CRITICAL THEORY (ACCORDING TO HABERMAS)<sup>16</sup>





## Footnotes

1. Vol. XXXVI (1988), pp. 533-538.
2. Joe Ruane, who is both a colleague of mine in the Department of Social Theory and Institutions, U.C.C., and a fellow-member of the Sociological Association of Ireland, where such an imputation is widespread, is aware of this. It is in fact he who brought the essay under review to my attention.
3. In the following Arabic numerals in parenthesis in the text refer to the essay under review.
4. That Jürgen Habermas and his colleague and friend Karl-Otto Apel and, following them, the contemporary movement of critical theory are by no means alone in undertaking this task is clear from the widespread concern since the 1960s with the normative foundations of the social sciences inspired, for instance, by such authors as Paul Lorenzen, John Rawls, Charles Taylor as well as such significant events in the history of sociology as the Functionalist Debate and the Positivist Dispute.
5. This is not an appropriate place to offer a bibliography of this rather extensive body of literature. On the evaluation of this literature, however, compare the still relevant essay of Albrecht Wellmer, "Praktische Philosophie und Theorie der Gesellschaft", in Willi Oelmlüller (ed.), *Normen und Geschichte* (Paderborn, Schöningh, 1979), pp. 140-174, particularly 144-146.
6. What is meant here is, roughly speaking the principle of discourse of Apel and Habermas.
7. Adorno, for instance, took pains to offer seminars on these problems, the impact of which can be seen e.g. in Jürgen Ritsert, *Inhaltsanalyse und Ideologiekritik* (Frankfurt, Athenäum, 1972). See also: Wolfgang Bonss and Axel Honneth (eds.), *Sozialforschung als Kritik* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1982) and Wolfgang Bonss, *Die Einübung des Tatsacheblicks: Zur Struktur und Veränderung empirischer Sozialforschung* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1982).
8. Apel and Habermas, among the critical theorists, have consistently pointed out the importance of the problem of meaning and its epistemological and methodological consequences (not to mention its general philosophical relevance). In Anglo-American philosophy and social science there is now also a tradition of acknowledging the fundamental difference between events and processes, on the one hand, and persons and their expressions/actions, on the other.
9. This is a heavily discussed topic not only in critical theory but also in other directions in the philosophy of the social sciences, e.g. phenomenology (Alfred Schutz), analytic philosophy (Peter Winch, Thomas Kuhn, Charles Taylor), constructivism (Paul Lorenzen and the Erlangen School), reflexive sociology (Alvin Gouldner) and hermeneutics (Theodor Kiesel).
10. As an example of this failure from the essay itself one may refer the reader to the poor assessment of Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity* which is presented as "a relatively simple introduction to some themes of his critical theory" (535), while it is actually --- and highly relevant for the main argument of the essay -- a demonstration of Adorno's application of his method of immanent critical-hermeneutical analysis in the form of a critique of the ideology of German existentialism as well as of its social consequences.
11. But is it simply a matter of "practical political"?
12. Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (London, Heinemann, 1976), pp. 72-73.

- 13 Compare the interesting comments of Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Frogmore, Paladin, 1973), pp. 23-25, whose epistemological-methodological position is in many respects strikingly similar to that put forward by Apel and Habermas.
- 14 Norman Stockman, "Habermas, Marcuse and the 'Aufhebung' of Science and Technology", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 8 (1978), pp. 15-35 e.g., offers some indications of a comparison of critical theory and the realist philosophy of science.
- 15 *The Jargon of Authenticity*, p. xx
16. Extracted for Piet Strydom, "Institutionalization in Critical Theoretical Perspective: Collective Learning, Social Movements and Social Change", Protocol of Graduate Seminar, Department of Social Theory and Institutions, U.C.C., 1986-87, p.7 and from Piet Strydom, "Jürgen Habermas", lecture delivered at One-Day Seminar on Modern Social Theory, Sociological Association of Ireland, Dublin, 1987, p.2. For a critique of Habermas and an indication of my own position, see Piet Strydom, "Collective Learning: Habermas's Concessions and Their Theoretical Implication", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 13/3 (1987), pp. 165-182.
- 17 This is also borne out by an investigation of the projects, ranging from the global capitalist system and contemporary capitalist societies through law and political freedoms to the development of moral consciousness and contemporary youth, undertaken by the Max Planck Institute in Starnberg under Habermas as its director of research for more than ten years during the 1970s and early 80s.