

Limitations of Frankfurt School *Hauptseminars* From a Perspective of the Dialectical Thought Form Framework (DTF)

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While resurgent interest in the writings of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno, is over-focused on the ideological content of his writings, a much more relevant aspect of Adorno's work is that of a teacher of 'deep', or dialectical, thinking. Adorno's 'Negative Dialektik' spells out his teaching only in a form once-removed, rather than giving an experience of his and Horkheimer's practice in real time. This practice found its focus in what an admirer of Adorno and himself a major philosopher, R. Bhaskar, referred to as *Absence*.

For both Adorno and Bhaskar, reality is pervaded by Absences – by what is not yet or no longer there -- with the important difference that Adorno understood himself as an epistemologist, while Bhaskar saw himself as an ontologist. While Adorno was fixated on the subject-object dialectic initiated by Descartes, Bhaskar saw human knowledge as being embedded in nature and society, and thus as overshadowed by reality.

Given the immense problems people face in the 21st century simply in terms of the adequacy of their thinking relative to their environment, it is time, I think, to avert one's attention from mere content, however ideologically appealing, and focus more systematically on the structure of thinking by which contents are, first of all, brought forth.

In this perspective, what should be in the forefront of thinking about the Frankfurt School today are not the results of its teaching, but its process and the social scaffolding of this process. Outside of lectures, and more impactful than they, Frankfurt School thinking was practiced in real time in Horkheimer and Adorno's famous *Hauptseminar*, a weekly 2-hr gathering of graduate students of philosophy.

Having regularly attended this workshop between 1958 and 1966, I will in this blog outline what has stayed in my memory as the most remarkable and least sensational and also least understood dimension of the work of the Frankfurt School.

Most remarkably, Hauptseminar teaching was based on a dialogue between Horkheimer and Adorno, lifelong friends, and from this root it spread into the small community of students listening to and following them in real time, once a week. The goal of the dialogue was a deeper understanding of Hegel's *Logic of 1812*, the work that incited Marx 40 years later to "put Hegel's thinking on its head" in order to establish, however incompletely and ambiguously, the grounding of a materialist conception of society and nature.

The focus on Hegel's *Logic* in the Hauptseminar was animated by the interest of the Frankfurt School in the structure of social more than individual consciousness, of the 'movements-in-thought' that were being sidelined if not suppressed by establishment thinking based on positivistic logic. It is this focus that makes the Hauptseminar as relevant today as it was 50 years ago, given that the present establishment, now hugely weaponized through software, is equally if not more controlling than it was perceived to be in the time of the Frankfurt School.

A secondary focus of the Hauptseminar was the demonstration that Hegel's dialectic was 'positive' rather than 'negative', in the sense that what outwardly appeared as a *transformation* was rather the re-instatement of a status quo, due to the fact that Hegel's thinking lacked what Bhaskar would refer to as a 'transformational component'.

In retrospect, however, for me this transformational component was also lacking in Frankfurt School thinking and teaching, where this absence took the form of the 'elephant in the room' nobody was noticing. In Bhaskar's terms, this absence of a transformational component in Frankfurt School thinking was the natural consequence of the absence of a notion of 'alethic truth', namely the lack of a focus on understanding the *necessity* of the generative mechanisms of nature and society in the ontological sense of the term that had re-emerged in a crude form in Marx's (and an even cruder form in Engels') writings.

Practically speaking, the absence of the concept of *alethic truth* in Frankfurt School thinking and teaching led to producing an ideology of anything and everything as "mediated by society", where "society" became the magic term that in the end explained nothing. Especially this term could not explain, as Marcuse

would put it, how, in partaking of society, the individual unceasingly re-generates the conditions s(he) was, or even felt to be, a victim of.

In retrospect, this dialectic of social agency as victimhood has today become visible as documenting individuals' inability, then and now, to grasp their own internal dialogue as the root of their construction of reality, which amounts to what Bhaskar referred to as 'irrealism as root of un-freedom'. Much more than mere 'lack of critical thinking', this inability is, for Bhaskar, the true *condition humaine* that keeps people enslaved.

The effect on the author of this irrealism was equally annulling since for about 30 years (1966 to 1996) he could not, try as he may, bring himself to read a single sentence of Frankfurt School writing. This was an aversion due to many reasons, mostly personal, that had to do with having taken a ship from Bremerhaven and feeling, as it gradually left the pier, that the enormous German fascination with history, especially German history, with a big 'thump' fell off my shoulders, including the 'Dialectic of Enlightenment' by which enlightenment had, early on, turned into *instrumental reason* (as it was called by Horkheimer), never to be seen again.

This tragic fate was pronounced by the authors (1946) in a tone of cognitive triumphalism – Bhaskar's phrase – that simultaneously declared total victory over the lack of understanding of history together with a puzzling satisfaction that needed no further empirical information regarding the forbidding state of the world that had taken over humanity. (In my Frankfurt time, we referred to this as 'insight with black ribbons' (Trauerflor)).

It was especially the denial of mental space for further research and thinking that seemed to deny the emigrant (me) the very essence of what I had absorbed of Hauptseminar dialectic that kept Frankfurt School findings a closed book for me, until in my sixties I had sufficiently cleared my mind – especially by studying levels of adult development – enough to yearn for a methodology able to recapture the pristine nature of the real world as it unfolded every morning of my life, at least if I was clear-headed enough to know that it is me bringing it forth with every movement-in-thought.

I was 70 when, probably not by accident, I discovered in a second-hand bookstore a copy of Roy Bhaskar's "Dialectic: The pulse of freedom" of 1993. This book

changed my life by also changing the way I was seeing the Frankfurt School with whom I was still umbilically identified. The book immediately resonated with me as it set out to explain why the urgent order of the day was *to re-totalize the four moments of dialectic under the sign of absence*. This formulation instantly sent a wireless message to my memory of Frankfurt School Hauptseminars since it was that graduate-student gathering near the Bockenheimer Warte in the late fifties and early sixties that had, in my late twenties, made me passionate about deep-thinking dialogues.

Bhaskar's writing reminded me of what I today see as the core of Frankfurt School teaching, both of Horkheimer and Adorno, -- namely the focused endeavor to spell out the internal dialogue of one's own thinking untrammelled by ideological or other traditions, in the context of a group (if not team) of like-minded, truth-searching (young) people who, for the first time in their life, are becoming aware, not so much of their own truth, but of what Bhaskar so eloquently called *alethic truth*, namely the truth one was striving to encounter with every movement-in-thought one was making, -- that of the 'real world' in contrast to what Bhaskar rightfully called the (merely) 'actual world' of empirical science.

It was at the boundary of 'real' and 'actual' world that the young mind could get a first grasp of what Bhaskar referred to as human thinking's *irrealism*, by which he meant that any thinking that does not understand itself as grounded in the overarching world independent of his/her thinking, which nevertheless is never just 'out there' but also 'in here', is hopelessly miles away from what he called *critical realism*.

What, however, even Bhaskar did not seem to see is that moving, in one's thinking, away from merely propositional to alethic truth -- and thus from the actual toward the real world -- **was actually a matter of dialogue as it was practiced in Frankfurt School Hauptseminars**, and thus could never be bottled up either in a single brain/body nor even a single community, because it was sovereignly spread out over body, self, and other in an ever-changing rhythmic of movements-in-thought.

In short, I realized that it took Bhaskar dialectic and Frankfurt School dialogue TOGETHER to enter into the domain of alethic truth, something that no merely

monological search for truth could ever enable, however much ‘data’ one might pile up and analyze to prove a point or nail a situation.

Historically, it took a step beyond Bhaskar, made in DTF, The Dialectical Thought Form Framework (Laske 2008), to explicate the irrationalism of human thinking as rooted in the absence of an awareness of the *thought forms* that unfold the four ontological dimensions of reality in individuals’ internal dialogue. It took what Bhaskar saw as ontological and called MELD (1M, 2E, 3L, and 4D), and what Laske, based on Adorno’s and Basseches’ (1978 f.) work, saw as the epistemological equivalent of MELD, namely, the four epistemological perspectives on the real world called Context (1M), Process (2E), Relationship (3L), and Transformation (4D), or CPRT, in DTF.

It was at this point that another Frankfurt teaching, indirectly aligned with Frankfurt School teaching, that of Bruno Liebrucks, re-emerged in my memory. Liebrucks had produced a 7-volume work, still unknown in English, entitled *Language and Consciousness* (Sprache und Bewusstsein; 1964-79) in which he spoke of ‘three revolutions’ of consciousness brought about by Plato, Kant, and Hegel, respectively.

The third revolution, or re-interpretation of thinking in thinking, refers to the new insight that Hegel’s Logic is also a philosophy of language, with the ethical consequence that individuals have a choice to act “at” or “below” the level of language, and largely keep below it (verbal and physical wars, propaganda, etc.).

This insight also entailed that there is no way of accessing the real world outside of natural language. It opened the way to the awareness that humans construct the real world in speaking about it with each other – that is, through dialogue. Consequently, the notion that one could think monologically, speaking only to oneself, was shown to be a total fiction since every movement-in-thought intrinsically referred to an *Other*, human or not. This Other, language-born and anonymous, was moreover *universal*, meaning that *in speaking we are addressing both the real world and each other simultaneously, and do so in a way that is always already at a meta-level, i.e., beyond what we aim to know about the empirical (actual) world. Consequently, language does not describe as much as create the world.*

Liebruck's insight into the nature of language as the central medium for encountering the real world has a huge impact not only on our understanding of logic, but even more so on that of dialectical thinking, because if language *creates world*, setting it forth based on purely logical thinking and its associated data sets will surely not create, but rather distort it by bending it to goals of the establishment (Horkheimer's 'instrumental reason').

If indeed movements-in-thought unfold Bhaskar's four ontological dimensions (1M, 2D, 3L, 4D) in the human mind, and do so based on what in the *Dialectical Thought Form Framework* (DTF) is called 'thought forms', then reading and critiquing texts and analyzing recorded and transcribed cognitive interviews – or indeed Twitter tweets – is potentially a preparation for upgrading text-based digital apps. Such apps can then be made "dialogically savvy" in the sense that human speaking/writing can become informed by an awareness of dialectical thought forms, and the use of such thought forms in speaking and writing can be digitally potentiated to levels of more complex thinking than binary logic allows for.

What are Thought Forms?

Thought Forms are ordinary concepts carried by language that historically have been shown to be able to guide abstract thinking in the direction of greater complexity as is required for more deeply understanding a specific event, (problem-) situation, configuration, design or totality seen as an ingredient of the real world. Since this world is in constant flux – not only 'change' but 'transformation' – thought forms (TFs) are tools (vehicles) by which to grasp not only the context in which such change and transformation occurs but also the processes by which they occur and the impact these processes have on re-configuring the relationships by which the constitutive elements of the real world are held together as a totality.

For instance, a notion like 'unceasing change' [thought form or TF 1], is a universal template for thinking and speaking about change as a never-ending occurrence which makes what is thought and done at a specific time into a mere moment of

the flow that carries events and situations into their next appearance in consciousness. In other words, the concept of *unceasing change* is a template for *dialoguing* with oneself and others about the real world from a specific perspective, that of Process (which is the moment of dialectic TF 1 refers to).

Since each of the four moments of dialectic has its own peculiar (proprietary) set of TFs which unfold it, when deciding to work with 7 TFs in each moment of dialectic, we arrive – as in the Dialectical Thought Form Framework -- at a set of 28 TFs that form the repertory of a dialectical thinker. These TFs are intrinsically linked since movements-in-thought naturally flow from one moment of dialectic (or class of thought forms) to another.

In the natural attempt of consciousness to act holistically and systemically, any subject matter can therefore be addressed from 28 different perspectives each of which potentially includes the others as next steps in consciousness. In a situation of dialogue, different TFs will be put forth by different dialogue partners, so that a reflection on group or team dialogue will have the effect of naturally broadening “what is said” (i.e., what has been created as an aspect of the real world) into a consecutively broader and deeper way of constructing that world.

Conclusion

It should have become clear that referring to the Frankfurt School merely by its outputs (writings, manifestoes, lectures, etc.) is a highly limited way, in fact a misleading way, of referring to it, not to speak of a mere reference making it impossible to enter into its spirit and intention, and thus remaining external to it. The School’s spirit is that of its (Frankfurt) Hauptseminar which to replicate, including by way of digital means, is a highly challenging undertaking.

The challenge I see is not simply a cultural one – having to do with finding a scaffolding for the humanistic intention of helping people become aware of their own internal dialogue in a time of oppressive uses of ‘apps’ that simply externalize logical thinking as text because they are not (yet) *dialogically savvy*, and thus act as a mere tool for aimless *doodling* within the confines of logical thinking and instrumental reason.

The challenge also has to do with the lack of a methodology – other than DTF – for not only identifying but also ‘weighting’ thought forms as is done in a two-step

process in DTF, -- first *identification* of a thought form during a real-time (recorded) interview, and second *weighting* of a thought form (possibly different from its first identification) in the 'scoring' [structural evaluation] of the interview transcript. In these two consecutive steps, students of DTF assure themselves that they have indeed hypothesized the correct thought form expressed in a text passage or real-time utterance, as well as that they can identify the 'strength' or 'weight' of a particular thought form in the whole of a 1-hr real-time conversation (interview) seen as a totality.

While one could object that 'assessment' is not the point in learning to think dialectically, it is nevertheless the discipline of Scoring an interview that empirically has been shown at the Interdevelopmental Institute (IDM), to be the most effective way of building up in the mind a sure sense of 'what aspect of a subject matter under transformation at what level of articulation' (namely, what thought form at what strength of articulation) is being focused on by an interlocutor at a particular moment of dialogue time.

What makes the absorption of the thought form structure of dialogue ***by way of mere listening*** dubious and questionable is that TFs not only have an identity ('this TF'; e.g. TF 1), but also a weight that is measured (not locally in a text but) in terms of the *real-time totality* of a conversation with an expert DTF listener (who could be seen as a simulation, if not equivalent, of the Horkheimer-Adorno pair directing the Hauptseminar in interaction with each other).

The placement, in DTF, of a thought form into a universe of discourse constituted by the totality of thought forms used by a speaker during a 1-hr interview has an importance for dialectical thinking that transcends mere assessment purposes (such as putting together the 'cognitive profile' of a speaker at a specific juncture of his/her cognitive development on account of what s(he) says or writes). The intent behind such placement is rather the insight that all moments of dialectic and all of their thought forms are intrinsically connected with each other, and that effective and incisive movements-in-thought (relative to the real or an equivalent imagined world) are not only connected retroactively (as in assessment) but also *pro-actively*, in 'foreseeing' how, as an individual speaker, one could/would move forward in the course of a conversation in order to create points of emphasis reflecting one's particular perspective on a subject matter.

For building a *dialogically savvy app*, this taking a speaker's forward movement in time into account poses the problem of how to envision (design) a personal thinking space corresponding to the speaker's internal dialogue – as defined by thought forms -- as it unfolds in real time. Even when assuming no more than 12 or 28 thought forms, accounting for the speaker's movements-in-thought forward would be a major challenge. The challenge could be tackled only by mapping out distinct mental spaces as totalities in which thoughts move at a specific level of cognitive development. In short, a dialogically savvy app would have to comprise a typology of levels of dialectical thinking (or thought form use) that by itself would be a developmental theory of a specific group of speakers and their predictable content productions.

Assuming that the typology would comprise just three (predictive) levels of cognitive development, thus thought form use fluidity (as assumed in Jan De Visch and my 2018 book "Dynamic Collaboration"), extending from what one might call 'logical' to 'systems' to 'transformational' thinking, an app would have to be able to detect early in a dialogue what level – let's say L1, L2, and L3 – a speaker is "on" to be of real help to the speaker in thinking dialogically. (This level might change over the course of a conversation, depending on the interlocutor.) The ability to distinguish three levels of discourse would then simulate, to some degree, the nature of the movement-in-thought forward in time that I spoke about earlier.

Building such an app would also show the limitations of attempting to learn thought forms through mere listening (even when repeated over time) *without any scoring experience* (text analysis experience) to speak of.

In fact, this is exactly the (pedagogical) limitation of Frankfurt School Hauptseminars!

As my memory of café discussions of students after the Hauptseminar (often into the night) tells me is that they sounded closer to Thomas Mann's description of Magic Mountain conversations than anything else. Not only did these discussions not clearly distinguish between content and its (thought form) structure. They also only approximately focused in on a specific concept (and thus thought form) of Hegel's Logic that had become the focus of Hauptseminar dialogue.

This very unsharp engagement with such dialogue was wide open to following purely ideological pathways, intermixed with personal preferences, at various cognitive developmental levels (which is equally found in most contemporary “criticism” of the Frankfurt School as ‘cultural Marxism’, heard from US culture war participants in the early 21st century).

This ‘free for all’ of only seemingly dialectical discussions is also the nemesis of pure listening approaches to learning dialectical thinking (in the sense of DTF) that miss the fundamental discipline of (prior) *scoring experience*.

The cutting edge of dialogically savvy apps would seem to be to simulate that experience, which is one of structured (i.e., thought-form based) listening.