CHAPTER THREE
THE LEGACY OF HEGELIAN PHILOSOPHY AND
THE FUTURE OF CRITICAL THEORY

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I

In the words of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, Critical Theory aims “to develop a critical theory of capitalism that integrates and is based upon research in the fields of moral philosophy, social theory, and political analysis.” By defining the aim of their theoretical enterprises in these terms, Fraser and Honneth refer back to the origins of Critical Theory. This school of thought—whose best-known representatives include thinkers like Theodor W. Adorno and Jürgen Habermas—was established by Max Horkheimer in the early 1930’s at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany. What Horkheimer intended to set up was a research program designed to analyze what he believed were pathologies caused by the capitalist economies of his time, and to examine the possibilities of economic and social arrangements that would not have such negative effects. Like Fraser and Honneth,
Horkheimer wished to provide both an analysis and a critique of capitalism that is informed by moral philosophy.

Although Horkheimer believed that such an enterprise required empirical studies and could only be carried out on the basis of philosophical, sociological and psychological research, his own studies suffered from an unquestioned reliance on Marx’s social theory as well as his idea of an unalienated, “rational” society. By contrast, some contemporary philosophers try to achieve the aims of Critical Theory with a recognition-theoretical framework inspired by Hegelian thought. Axel Honneth initiated and continues to be the most important representative of the ‘recognition-theoretical turn’ in Critical Theory. In fact, Honneth takes recognition theory to be a particularly well-suited basis for an analysis and a critique of contemporary capitalism that is informed by moral philosophy. He also draws on Hegelian thought in an effort to substantiate this claim.

What are the main arguments behind the kind of Critical Theory defended by Honneth? Is it successful? In what follows, I shall examine these questions. First, I will lay out the main features of Honneth’s theory (II) and then consider the criticism that both his analysis and critique of capitalism have received (III). With resources provided by a new interpretation of several elements in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,

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4 Compare Horkheimer, “Die gegenwärtige Lage der Sozialphilosophie und die Aufgaben eines Instituts für Sozialforschung.”


6 Compare for example Horkheimer, “Materialismus und Metaphysik,” pp.117 and 137.