With such a complex topic it is advisable to introduce a few theses that can express one’s own viewpoint as trenchantly as possible. I want to proceed in three steps. First 1), I sketch the reasons for critical theory’s dependence upon psychoanalysis. 2) In contrast to the objection of revisionism made by the older representatives of the Frankfurt School, I then proceed to discuss the necessity of keeping an open attitude towards object-relations theory. I do this in order to consider, in the last step, 3) whether the price for this paradigm shift is too high. For with this move, the notion of ‘negativity’, Freud’s real ‘sting’ [Stachel], would be removed, in certain respects, from the psychoanalytical approach. It is only with this third, and last thesis that I come to discuss the problem that gave the title of my paper its impetus. The detour through the first two steps is necessary, however, in order to be able to work out at all the status of the question of the ‘negative’.

There are at least two reasons that speak for the fact that a critical theory of society in the
Frankfurt School tradition continues to keep a close connection with psychoanalysis as a theoretical formation. To be sure, this grounding will not be discovered so long as one refers only to the legacy of Adorno’s or Marcuse’s writings. Indeed, looked at from today’s perspective, the co-operation between critical theory and psychoanalysis first envisaged by Horkheimer, and then actually worked through by Fromm, has something of an accidental quality. Back then there was a broad range of attempts at an integration of Marxism and psychoanalysis, which had in essence the goal of supplementing the societal-theoretical kernel of historical materialism through psychoanalytical theory. The latter was supposed to explain the absence of revolutionary upheaval, in other words, the degree of social integration. Here psychoanalysis offered its services, since it appeared well suited to make explicit the psychic, unconscious forces of attachment [Bindungskräfte] that prevented the dominated subject from perceiving his or her rational interests. Already after the end of fascism, but more emphatically after the (partial) return of Frankfurt Institute members to the now established Federal Republic of Germany, the socio-cultural situation had altered itself to such an extent that it was no longer the psychic integration of the proletariat but rather the peculiar apathy and lack of resistance of the entire population that presented itself as the problem to be explained. But here again psychoanalysis offered itself anew as a complementary theoretical strategy. For in conjunction with assumptions about the decline of the capitalist market, it offered the prospect of interpreting the subject’s loss of ego [Ich-Verlust], the ‘crisis’ of the individual, as the inner-psychical consequence of the loss of paternal authority.

Since then, with the dramatic alteration of temporal-historical experience [Erfahrung], the primary evidence for the necessity of an integration of psychoanalysis and critical theory has also disappeared. In times of rapid de-traditionalisation of the lifeworld, wherein subjects appear to participate personally in the process of individualisation and autonomisation, it is in any case no longer obviously clear what explanatory aim a critical theory of society fitted out with psychoanalytical concepts would actually pursue. And the conjuring up of a fusion between both theories is often simply the expression of an orthodoxy hostile to experimentation, a thoughtless defence against conceptual innovation. The question concerning which interdisciplinary profile a critical theory of society should possess is not answered once and for all;