Interpretation for Emancipation: Taylor as a Critical Theorist

In this paper I attempt to add weight to Ruth Abbey's suggestion that at the centre of Charles Taylor's work is a 'philosophy of freedom' whose significance is yet to be properly appreciated (Abbey 2018, 790). Certain aspects of Taylor's philosophy of freedom have received their fair share of attention: his critique of theories of negative freedom, such as are typically advanced or presupposed by liberals and libertarians, for example, and his defence of 'republican' models of freedom in the civic humanist tradition, are long-standing staples of political philosophy (Taylor 1985a, 1995a). Taylor's interpretations of the theories of freedom elaborated by Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx and others (Taylor 1975, 1985b, 1985c, 1995b, 1995c) have also hardly gone unnoticed. But what has generally escaped attention is the distinctive character of the theory of freedom that emerges from Taylor's engagements with the range of modern theories. It has not sufficiently sunk in that Taylor has his own theory of freedom, that it plays an important role in his work as a whole, and that it is worthy of discussion in its own right.

We will look at some of the key features of this theory below. However, the philosophy of freedom I take to be at stake in Taylor's work is not just a matter of the *doctrine* of freedom laid out there. To have a philosophy of freedom, in the sense I am attributing to Taylor, is not just to have freedom as a central (if sometimes only implicit) *theme* of one's reflections. More fundamentally, it is also to have as a goal of one's reflections a *becoming* free; it is a matter of doing something, by way of theory of a certain kind, whose aim is a *realization* of freedom. The thesis I am submitting is thus that to get to the core of Taylor's philosophy, we should indeed see it as a philosophy of freedom; but more than this, we should see it as a philosophy *for* freedom, a philosophy that in some

sense aims to 'free'. My claim, then, is that underlying Taylor's philosophy of freedom is a philosophy of *liberation*. His theoretical work is of a kind that aims at furthering understanding of its subject-matter, which centrally includes freedom; but in doing that, at its best, it can also realize another aim: it can *emancipate*.

If this proves to be a fair characterization of Taylor's philosophy, then it falls in the class of what Jürgen Habermas called 'critical' theories (Habermas 1971). Habermas proposed that human inquiry has built-in 'cognitive interests': a 'technical' interest in prediction and control in the case of the empirical sciences, a 'practical' interest in intersubjective understanding in the case of the interpretive sciences, and in the case of critical theories, an 'emancipatory' interest. By this criterion – namely the cognitive interest underpinning the kind of theorizing Taylor for the most part does – Taylor is a critical theorist and his work can properly be read either as a contribution to critical theory or as a model of how critical theory might be done. As we shall see, incorporation of an emancipatory interest is not the only criterion that a critical theory is supposed to meet, and it is not only by meeting this criterion that Taylor contributes to critical theory or shows us how to do theory of that kind. However, my suggestion will be that it is above all in terms of the link Taylor maintains between theory and emancipation across his work that we should understand his ongoing legacy for critical theory.

The structure of the discussion is as follows. First, I offer a short outline of Taylor's theory of freedom, emphasising the conception it contains of the process of becoming free. Then I look at Taylor's view of the role theory can take in that process. The liberating power of theory isn't something that Taylor often remarks explicitly upon, but from the few remarks he does make it is clear that he sees his own theory as at least potentially having such a power. The discussion then turns to the central tasks of critical theory. After

summarizing these tasks, I consider how Taylor attempts to address them in his own work. The point of the discussion is not just to show the convergence between Taylor's theoretical agenda and that of critical theory, but also to indicate how critical theory can learn from the integration in Taylor's work of the tasks critical theory sets itself. I conclude by noting a dilemma that faces critical theorists who aspire to such integration today.

Taylor's theory of freedom

As I have said, Taylor has written a lot about freedom, and it would take up much more space than I have to go into the details of his discussions. It will suffice to outline the key features of Taylor's theory of freedom in so far as they are linked to the theory's emancipatory purpose. We are looking at Taylor's theory of freedom, then, with a view to seeing how adoption of that theory might liberate, liberate more effectively than the main rival theories of freedom.

Three contrasts are especially important for the articulation of Taylor's theory. One is a contrast between negative and positive theories that follows the spirit if not the letter of Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction (Berlin 1969). The short answer to the question that forms the title of Taylor's paper 'What's Wrong with Negative Liberty' is that theorists of negative freedom, spooked by a spectre of unambiguous *un*freedom (what Taylor calls the 'Totalitarian Menace'), revert to an equally unambiguous but unsatisfactory conception of freedom as pure opportunity: the sheer absence of obstacles or interferences (Taylor 1985a: 215). The error lies not in taking freedom as an 'opportunity-concept' as such, but in denying that freedom is also an 'exercise-concept'. Understood as an exercise-concept, freedom is an achievement that depends on how well and how extensively capacities for self-realization are exercised. Taylor defends a conception of freedom that incorporates *some* qualitative distinctions between motivations, purposes and forms of life, and that

builds in *some* standards for distinguishing more or less satisfactory forms of self-realization (Taylor 1985a: 219). This makes freedom exercised in self-realization (positive freedom) a more complex and ambiguous matter than the pure opportunity concept of freedom allows. The exercise concept of freedom might appear a less effective bulwark against the 'Totalitarian Menace' than the opportunity concept, but it is indispensable for grasping the meaning of freedom. The spectre of totalitarianism that haunts positive theories, Taylor suggests, has to be exorcised by other means (Taylor 1985a: 229).

The second contrast Taylor invokes, between 'absolute' and 'situated' freedom, helps to perform this task (Taylor 1975: 557-564; 1980: 144). For theories that take freedom to be a pure opportunity concept, the process of becoming free is that of removing obstacles or impediments to action. For positive theories, there is some further point to freedom, which involves self-realization through the exercise of capacities. But this too can be conceived in a pure form, such that anything external to the self, or any aspect of self-realization that is not self-*determined*, can appear as an absence, or failure, of freedom. Only a fully autonomous agent, whose will is fully self-determining, can then properly be said to be free. The process of becoming free, on this understanding, is that of expunging heteronomous elements. The endpoint of this process is what Taylor (following Hegel) calls 'absolute freedom' (Taylor: 1975: 557). It is the hold of the idea of absolute freedom, rather than positive freedom as such, Taylor suggests, that can give rise to totalitarianism. For it can make it seem as if freedom is an 'all or nothing' affair, as if you are either 'fully in' or 'fully out' as far as membership of a self-determining entity is concerned. Identification with this entity must be total; anything less would bring heteronomy or inauthenticity and must be expunged.

But absolute freedom is not just a dangerous idea; it is an incoherent one. For it is incompatible with what Taylor describes as the inescapably 'situated' character of human life. Human life is situated in the sense that projects of self-realization are bounded by something given – at the most general level, by some position in history and some relationship to nature. Situated freedom, then, is not a matter of *breaking through* these limits, as if they were obstacles to action or sources of heteronomy. Rather it involves an 'affirmation' of them as the conditions of the only kind of self-realization available to human beings (Taylor 1975: 563). Becoming free, on the situated as distinct from both the negative and absolute conceptions of freedom, involves an acknowledgement of finitude and dependence.

The third contrast appears in various manifestations in Taylor's work, in his discussion of different types of liberalism (1995a), theories of practical reason (1995d), and theories of modernity (1995f), as well as his writing on freedom. This is the contrast between 'procedural', 'formal', or 'criterial' theories, on the one hand, and 'substantive' or 'cultural' ones on the other. Applied to freedom, procedural theories abstract from the meaning freedom has for participants in lived cultural practices. From the standpoint afforded by such abstraction, they posit criteria by reference to which the freedom present in or enabled by such practices can be measured. Freedom is defined procedurally and formalistically: typically, by way of legal entitlements, but perhaps also in terms of the availability of measurable, culturally-neutral 'all-purpose' goods, such as Rawlsian primary goods. Substantive theories of freedom, by contrast, view freedom as essentially embedded in a form of life, as possessing a *quality* inseparable from that of the culture in which it is set. To say that freedom can vary in regard to its quality is to say that it can flourish or degrade, be enriched or impoverished. In order to identify such qualitative change, the

substantive theorist must have recourse to something more than formalizable techniques for measuring and distributing freedom. She must be able to describe the main cultural practices that embed freedom – such as the public sphere and civil society – and tell a story or their rise or decline.

Taylor's is thus a theory of positive not just negative freedom, of situated but not absolute freedom, and of culturally embodied rather than formally encapsulated freedom. In having these features, Taylor's theory also offers an account of what it is (and what it is not) to become free. The process of becoming free is not just a matter of having opportunities opened up; it also involves realizing some ends rather than others. The capacity exercised in becoming free is not simply that of removing internal or external obstacles, of breaking down barriers or negating limits; it also involves some acceptance and affirmation of things as they are. The process of becoming free is better understood as involving a transition in the quality of life than in the satisfaction of some externally constructed criterion. And partly for this reason, this process should not be thought as an all or nothing affair, or as something that secures freedom once and for all, preserved in isolation from other more contestable goods. Rather, it is a process in need of continual renewal and happens through a variety of practices with typically ambiguous and never completely settled results.

From a theory of freedom to emancipatory theory

Let us now turn to the role that theorizing, and specifically the kind of theorizing Taylor engages in, can have in the process of becoming free. That Taylor sees himself as engaging in theory of that kind – what I am calling emancipatory theory – is evident from the few occasions where he writes in a meta-theoretical vein. One such is in the conclusion to *Sources of the Self* (hereafter, *SoS*), where he describes the book as 'the kind of study' that

'can be a work, we might say, of liberation' (Taylor 1989a: 520). The work of *interpretation*, Taylor is saying, can have a liberating effect. The implication is that if we hope to become free, engaging in interpretive inquiry might help. What is the object of the interpretations that, in the case of a study like *SoS,* can liberate? Obviously, 'the self', in the sense Taylor evokes by that term. This means that *self*-interpretations, or as the sub-title of Taylor's study indicates, interpretations of the *making* of an identity, can liberate.

To make the self an object of interpretation, in Taylor's sense, is to focus on the ideals, aspirations, or things that lend significance to human life at a given place and time. We could say that the object of the kind of interpretation at stake here is 'values' – qualified perhaps, to avoid confusion with the utilitarian concept, as 'strong' values – but another shorthand might be 'spirit'. It is by way of interpreting the 'spiritual life', as it is conceived and practiced at a particular time and place, that liberation can happen. Of course, 'spirit' should not be understood as something immaterial, other-than-the-body, or religious as opposed to secular. Rather it is he dignity-conferring, or honour-conferring, or meaning-conferring aspect of embodied human life (Taylor 1989a: 15ff). Paradigmatically, it is the stuff of the 'spiritual quest' – the search for a truly dignified or honourable or more meaningful form of life; for truly or more fully *self-realized* life – though in most cases its presence is unspoken. The object of an interpretation of the making of the modern identity, then, is the understandings of what is meaning-conferring or honour-conferring or dignity-conferring in human life that came to be in the time and place of 'modernity', and the practices that instantiate those understandings.

There is a sense in which 'spirit' is not only the object of the liberating interpretation, but also the subject liberated. The liberation at stake is a spiritual one. The enquiry is occasioned by a certain oppression or suppression of spirit – Taylor uses the expressions

'cramped postures of suppression' (1989a: 107), 'stifling of the spirit' (1989a: 107), 'spiritual lobotomy' (1989a: 520), spiritual 'mutilation' (1989a: 520), and 'half-collapsed lungs of the spirit' (1989a: 520) to describe this state of spiritual discontent – and it results, when successful as a 'work of liberation', in a setting-free of spirit and an opening up spiritual possibilities. The liberation or setting-free of spirit is not just a removal of obstacles, but also a movement toward some spiritual achievement. When Taylor describes *SoS* as a work of 'retrieval' (1989a: xi; 520), he has in mind a rediscovery or renewal of spiritual possibilities that have become lost or needlessly closed or cut off. The main possibility of this kind that he seeks to retrieve in *SoS* is 'the exploration of orders of significance through languages of personal resonance' (1989a: 511). Although this spiritual possibility only becomes available under conditions of modernity, so Taylor argues, it is also suppressed or rendered unintelligible by the dominant modes of modern thought. Coming to see such exploration as legitimate, and finding fulfilment from embarking on such explorations, is to be liberated in this aspect of spiritual life. We are oppressed by dominant forms of self-interpretation that close off or render inaccessible certain spiritual possibilities – possibilities of a deeper, fuller spiritual or experiential life – and we are liberated by, so to speak, 'recessive' forms of self-interpretation that re-open or give new access to those possibilities (Lovibond 1983).

If this is what 'liberation' in the relevant sense consists in, then it happens in the *movement* from one kind of self-interpretation to another. The liberating transition from a defective self-interpretation to a less defective one empowers the self (1989a: 520). For a self to be empowered is for it to be capable of responding effectively to the situation it finds itself in. From the perspective of Taylor's general theory of freedom, the liberating power of theory must be considered as the enhanced capacity that theory brings not for action of any

sort, but for effective responses to the demands of a situation. In the case of the interpretive theory undertaken in *SoS*, these demands are the spiritual predicaments facing the modern self, and the 'empowerment' at stake refers to a capacity to deal effectively with those predicaments. Elsewhere, Taylor characterizes the transitions established by interpretive theory as gains in *rationality* (Taylor 1989a: 72; 1995d). The transitions sought are 'error-reducing', remove 'distortions' and bring greater 'clairvoyance'. Characterized this way, the liberating effect of interpretive theory resembles the classical Enlightenment conception of emancipation through the shedding of illusion.

But the 'work of liberation' done by the kind of historical, self-interpretive inquiry undertaken in *SoS* should be distinguished from both the classical conception of enlightenment, on the one hand, and 'postmodern' or 'poststructuralist' conceptions of theory on the other. Whilst the classical conception of enlightenment draws on the imagery of a passage from darkness to light, where the truth reveals itself once sources of error are removed, the 'clairvoyance' achieved by interpretive insight enables a kind of agency, a capacity to engage effectively with one's environment in a way that is self-constituting of one's identity. The empowerment is not taking control over an environment and reshaping it according to subjective purposes, as the classical enlightenment conception presents it, but that coming from greater openness, and more nuanced attention, to the demands various environments (including historical ones) make on an agent. And whilst postmodern or poststructuralist theories depict their liberating power in terms of an unshackling of theory from norms of any kind (including the norm of truth), Taylor convincingly shows the incoherence of that conception and the need for an alternative model grounded in an acknowledgement of a defining situation (Taylor 1985c, 1988, 1989b).

Before moving onto to consider how Taylor's theory, qua emancipatory theory, is a critical theory, I respond to two objections that might be put to my reading. The first is that I am ignoring the often critical – and occasionally rather dismissive – tone in which Taylor speaks of 'philosophies of liberation'. Taylor has been a vehement critic of Marcuse's philosophy of liberation (Taylor 1970), he criticizes post-structuralist thought for illicitly framing ill-conceived philosophies of liberation, and there are other times when Taylor seems to associate philosophies of liberation with a superficial cult of authenticity. But given his own commitment to theory that can be a 'work of liberation', it makes more sense to read Taylor not as rejecting liberation philosophy *as such*, but as rejecting particular conceptions of liberation and the liberating role of theory. When Taylor criticizes philosophies of liberation, his aim is not to dissuade us from doing philosophy aimed at liberation, but to do it in a different way.

A second objection that might be put is that my reading exaggerates the significance of his remark that *SoS* is the kind of study that can be a work of liberation. Even if historical, interpretive enquiry of the kind undertaken in *SoS can* be liberating, it has this feature only contingently. An interpretive theory might sometimes be a 'work of liberation', but in cases where it is, this is just a lucky spin-off, and should not be confused with the criteria relevant for assessing the validity of the theory. But it is clear from Taylor's other meta-theoretical writings that this is not his view. In 'Social Theory as Practice', the most fleshed-out of these, Taylor explicitly ties the validity of social and political theories to the quality of the practice they inform (Taylor 1985d). In Taylor's view, all practices are informed to various degrees by theoretical understanding, but some practices are more 'stumbling' than others on account of inadequacies in their theoretical self-understanding. 'Good theory', Taylor claims, 'enables practice to become less stumbling and more clairvoyant' (1985d: 111). But the

transition from the more to the less 'stumbling', or from 'stumbling' to 'clairvoyant' practice, is just what a *liberation* achieves. Social and political theorizing is occasioned by some 'stumbling', 'self-defeating' or 'self-stultifying' practice, and at its best, such theorizing can help to alleviate these afflictions by bringing 'clairvoyance'. In doing so, theories of this kind can emancipate.

Critical theory

The burden of my argument has been to show that Taylor is not just a theorist of freedom, but also a practitioner of emancipatory theory. When successful, the historical, self-interpretive inquiries he undertakes can liberate, and do so not merely by chance, but purposefully. If this is a fair characterization of Taylor's theoretical work, and its guiding telos is emancipation of some kind, then it should be considered as 'critical theory', in the sense Habermas conferred on that term. However, it might be objected that this move is too quick, since even if Taylor's social theory does incorporate what we could call a cognitive interest in emancipation, this only makes it a critical theory if the sense Habermas conferred on that term was the right one. It could be objected that Habermas's emphasis on cognitive interests was one-sided or misplaced, and that critical theory should be considered as possessing features other than, or in addition to, a cognitive interest in emancipation, features that might be lacking in Taylor's theory.

There are three main ways, in addition to the incorporation of an emancipatory interest, in which critical theorists have sought to distinguish the kind of theorizing they do from other kinds. The issues here are wide-ranging and complex so I need to be very selective and some simplification will be necessary. I focus on the distinctive tasks of critical theory, tasks which, critical theorists claim, are inadequately dealt with, neglected or

suppressed by other modes of theorizing. I refer briefly to some of the original formulations of the idea of critical theory as well as more recent discussions.

The first distinguishing feature of critical theory, which is particularly prominent in Max Horkheimer's formulation, is the heightened level of 'reflexivity' critical theory shows relative to 'traditional' theory (Horkheimer 1972). Horkheimer means the reflective awareness a theory has of the conditions of its own emergence qua theory. These include 'transcendental' conditions of the kind investigated by Kant and Hegel, but in contrast to idealist approaches, they also include the material conditions of theorizing and the imbrication of theory in real material life. The critical, unlike the traditional theorist, does not simply bracket or take for granted the conditions of the production of theory, as if the quality or validity of theory is fundamentally untouched by those conditions. And she does not take as given or unquestioned her position qua theorist within the productive process. Rather, the critical theorist shows awareness of her immersion within a material form of life, is aware of how theories are themselves imbricated in and serve to legitimate such forms, and is oriented in her own theorizing to an emancipation of the material conditions presupposed by that theorizing.

The second feature of critical theory is its opposition to the present, or at least to the dominant forces at large in it. 'Critique', in the sense that pertains to critical theory, is at once critical of the dominant forms of contemporary life (it is opposed to them) and reflexively self-aware of what makes for genuine as distinct from merely apparent or superficial criticism. For this reason, critical theory has been characterized as 'metacritique', as 'second order' enquiry into the grounds of social criticism as distinct from 'first order' criticism of social reality itself (Kortian 1980, Jaeggi 2018). Social critique needs metacritique, critical theorists argue, because left to itself social critique can go wrong. One

danger is that it can become 'utopian': it can aim at or presuppose norms or states of affairs that are completely detached from reality and have no chance of coming into existence. To avoid this, critical theorists have tended to favour models of 'immanent' critique. But immanent critique also has its dangers: it might appear too conservative, as compromised by ideology or distorted self-understandings, as insufficiently distanced from the existing social order and hence incapable of seeing the full extent of its wrongs. A central pre-occupation of critical theorists has thus been to articulate an authentically critical standpoint, that can reliably deliver *rationally justified* social criticism. But this ought not to be the sole pre-occupation of critical theory: for without a first order critical or oppositional component, it would be no different from 'traditional' forms of normative theory that effectively serve to justify the status quo.

A third feature of critical theory is its concern with 'totality'. Whereas traditional forms of normative theory tend to analyse or construct norms independently of their embodiment in historical processes, critical theory takes the norms serviceable for critique to be inseparably bound up with history and with the normative direction of history itself. This means, on the one hand, that social criticism is typically framed by some historical narrative, by a story of falling away from or movement towards some desirable human state. Critical theorists are generally sceptical of theories of unblemished historical progress, but they cannot be without some sense of historical hope, of the redeeming possibilities of human history. It also means that critical theorists must have some way of characterizing the times we live in as a whole. One of their central tasks is a 'diagnosis of the times' and in particular an understanding of the 'contradictions', 'crises' or sources of 'self-negation' within the current phase of history (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). The young Karl Marx's formulation of the task of critical theory as 'the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes

of the age', rightly considered by Nancy Fraser as an unsurpassed definition of critical theory, is apt here (Marx 1975: 209 Fraser 1989: 113). For it is by bringing clarity or 'self-consciousness' to these struggles that a progressive resolution of the crises, contradictions and conflicts that beset the age may occur.

The concern with 'totality', the commitment to 'immanent' critique, and the search for reflexivity, are three key features of critical theory. There is dispute amongst critical theorists as to how best to incorporate these concerns and commitments. But these features of critical theory subtend on another that was paramount for the first and second generations of critical theorists and which no clear-minded critical theorist would renounce: its interest in emancipation.

Taylor's legacy

We can turn to Taylor to see how the three features of critical theory just summarized can be retained without losing sight of the underlying emancipatory interest. As far as I can tell, Taylor nowhere invokes a distinction between 'traditional' theory and 'critical theory' for the sake of illuminating his own theoretical stance. However, references to 'mainstream social science' abound, and are rarely flattering. 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', for example, contains a critique of mainstream – and in that sense 'traditional' – ways of doing social science, and an alternative, non-mainstream or 'non-traditional' approach is being recommended (Taylor 1985e). The 'lack of reflection' that Horkheimer and Habermas find at the heart of positivism and its offsprings (the 'mainstream' approach to the human sciences in the mid-twentieth century) is exactly the weakness Taylor finds in it. What Taylor calls his 'monomaniac' critique of naturalism (Taylor 1985f: 1) is no less than an attempt to bring reflection or 'reflexivity' to the social sciences; to make them less 'traditional' and more 'critical'.

Another placeholder Taylor uses for what Horkheimer called 'traditional' theory is 'epistemology'. When he criticizes 'epistemology' – and speaks of its 'overcoming' (Taylor 1995e) – Taylor has in mind a lack of reflection on just those presuppositions of theorizing of which Horkheimer spoke. Taylor is not so much interested in the empirical or material presuppositions of theory – the kind that might be investigated by a sociologist of knowledge – as in the underlying motivating ideals of theory, the kind investigated by a genealogist or historian of ideas. But Taylor would insist, surely correctly, that such historical enquiry need not be at the expense of an understanding of the material forms of life from which theory emerges, since material forms of life are themselves shaped by ideals, the very same ideals, in fact, that shape dominant practices of theorizing.

Taylor's critique of 'mainstream social science', 'naturalism' and 'epistemology' is thus very much in the spirit of critical theory as Horkheimer originally conceived it. But its character as critical theory is also, and crucially, bound up with the way Taylor links the critique of traditional theories of knowledge to an ideal of freedom and a potential for liberation. On the one hand, there is the matter of bringing to light the extent to which the prestige of modern natural science, and the efforts of mainstream social science to imitate it, derives not just from its efficacy in satisfying the 'technical interest', but also from its association with a certain understanding of freedom as disengaged. By adopting a disengaged stance to the world, we acquire competence as mainstream theorists and position ourselves as 'knowers' in the traditional sense, the sense of thinking 'objectively'. But in the same act of disengagement, the theorist frees herself from the illusions and partialities of the pre-objective world and becomes free to impose her own purposes onto that world. Once this structure is brought to reflection, the next task is to show the limits of disengaged freedom and of the liberation of disengagement. This involves reminders of our

essential embodiment, of our inescapable emplacement in history and nature. It involves an understanding of freedom as 'situated' in the sense invoked in Taylor's theory of freedom.

Insight into the limits of the disengaged, objectifying stance can be liberating, especially if you are a philosopher, social scientist or student of social or political science at a modern university. But the liberation achieved here is not just a 'freedom from', it is not the epistemological anarchy sometimes associated with non-mainstream or radical theory. Rather, it is a kind of freedom that is situated within a 'horizon' of understanding and responsive to the specificity of the object under investigation.

If we turn to the second feature of critical theory, its commitment to clarifying the rational basis of social criticism and to developing forms of immanent critique, we find in Taylor a similar focus on content and a reluctance to invoke general or foundational norms. Taylor says very little about a worry that, as we just saw, perplexes many critical theorists: that of defining standards by reference to which *any* practice or form of life, practices or forms of life *as such*, can be criticised (Jaeggi 2018). He is unconcerned by the worry that unless we have some *guarantor* of the validity or authenticity of the values appealed to in social criticism, that criticism cannot be trusted. He therefore does not see it either as a requirement of social criticism that it meet general criteria of validity that have unlimited application, or as a requirement of critical theory that it formulate such criteria.

But rather than seeing the lack of a systematically constructed rational foundation for social criticism as a weakness of his critical theory, we could see it as a way of keeping the overarching telos of critical theory, its emancipatory interest, in view, and of avoiding the danger of putting procedure before substance that is characteristic of 'epistemology'. The danger here is not just that of prioritizing 'second-order' analysis of the grounds of social criticism to the detriment of first order social criticism – though that is real enough. It

is also that if we circumscribe the scope of valid social criticism ex ante on the basis of some rationally acceptable criterion it must meet, we may blinker ourselves to things that call for criticism and overconcern ourselves with less significant objects of critique. It has always been Taylor's view that there should be no ex ante or externally imposed constraints on *criticism*. The whole of a way of life – be it the way of life under capitalism or welfare socialism or Soviet communism, clericalism or secularism, democracy or despotism – should be up for grabs, not just its economic, moral, political or religious dimensions.[1]

Taylor was early of the view, which has never changed, that in criticising forms of life, the social critic should have her eye on the *quality* of life at stake and how that might be improved (Taylor 1960). Changes in the quality of a form of life cannot be measured according to some calculus or assessed by reference to criteria that apply equally to all forms of life. But that does not prevent the critic from talking meaningfully and with more or less justification of gains or losses in quality. It is the task of 'immanent critique', on this understanding, to identify the scope for and conditions of such quality-improving transitions. And in performing this function, critique can realize its emancipatory goal.

Taylor has contributed significantly to a 'self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age'. These wishes are what his term the 'modern identity' stands for; the struggles are what Taylor discusses under the headings the 'conflicts' and 'malaises' of modernity; and the point of Taylor's interpretations is to bring these things to self-clarification. His interpretations of the modern identity and the conflicts and malaises of modernity can be seen as making more precise the sense in which a self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age is the central task of critical theory. It is not just any wishes that critical theorists need to clarify, but the self-defining ones, those that affect people most deeply. And it is struggle motivated by the frustration or suppression of such desires and aspirations

– for example for dignity, honour, or authenticity – that critical theorists most need to understand. Of course, this is not to say that struggles for the satisfaction of basic material needs – for the satisfaction of the wish, for example, to put food on the plate – are not the provenance of critical theory. But, on the one hand, the meaning of such wishes is obvious; we don't need theory to interpret them. And on the other, as has often been pointed out, it is typically the de-humanizing aspect of material deprivation – the indignity of it, the sense of injustice at the hunger '*we'* suffer, the degradation imposed on '*our'* form of life -- that motivates struggle. The meaning of wishes of this kind, and the validity of claims implicit in them, do often stand in need of theoretical clarification, clarification in regard to the meaning and validity of the strong evaluations involved.

But nowhere is this need for interpretive self-clarification more necessary than in wishes and struggles for freedom. Even if freedom is not the all-encompassing ideal of modernity that (amongst both Hegelians and liberals) it is sometimes taken to be, a desire for freedom, often expressed negatively as resistance to perceived restrictions on freedom, is a defining characteristic of many of the struggles and conflicts of modern times. And arguably, there has never been a greater need for insightful interpretation of the meaning of freedom as a self-defining value than we have today. Now more than ever, critical theorists must be able to call out the 'impoverishment' of the freedom realized by the dominant institutions of the contemporary age (Honneth 2020), and be ready to challenge the shallow and self-defeating interpretations of freedom at large in xenophobic and populist resistance to those institutions. Taylor's legacy for critical theory may be no more significant than in the guidance he provides for undertaking both tasks.

But it is only worth doing this if some alternative realization of freedom is in view, if the fake versions of liberation stand to be superseded by genuine forms. We need not just

interpretations of what freedom and liberation might fully be, but also understandings of how such interpretations have become embedded in actual practice. Awareness of past achievements can give hope for the future, and without some such hope, critique of the present is idle. Some way of connecting with the emancipation struggles of the past – both the successful and unsuccessful – is thus another task for critical theory. Taylor's histories of the modern identity and the formation of a secular age are too general to connect some particular emancipatory struggles with their pasts, and to ground hope by way of forging those connections. But a narrative that leaves the future open to further and fuller realizations of freedom, as Taylor's does, is at least the kind of history critical theorists need.

A dilemma

This brings us back to the issue I raised but postponed earlier about the material or empirical conditions of critical theory. A question that can be awkward to ask but to which critical theorists owe an answer is: to whom is critical theory primarily *addressed*? With rare exceptions, the honest answer is other critical theorists, meaning other specialists in a branch of enquiry recognized and supported institutionally by universities. From a material, empirical point of view, it is above all the established protocols of university-administered research that governs how critical theory is done, the form in which it is produced, who gets to do it, and who gets to read or listen to end-use it. There was a time when the legitimacy of the university in serving this function was itself an object of reflection for critical theorists, as one would expect it to be given the critical theorist's concern with reflexivity and the conditions of theory production. If it is no longer such an object of reflection, it may be because *in practice* critical theory has been assimilated to traditional theory; that in order to survive in the context of the current institutionalization of knowledge, critical theory has had to compete with other forms of disciplinary inquiry under the same set of

institutional rules, to prove itself in just the same way as other forms of disciplinary inquiry in a university do. This leaves critical theorists with a dilemma. Either they theorize in a way that is recognized and rewarded according to the protocols of the contemporary university, using the same measures it uses for all other theorizing; or they address themselves to a different constituency, heightening the emancipatory potential of the theory, but jeopardizing the material conditions of their theorizing secured through their institutional position. The thought that these two goals – success in a university and realization of an emancipatory interest – were comfortably reconcilable may once have passed muster. Today, it looks simply naïve.

Taylor's social criticism and critical theory has a much broader set of addressees. This includes experts in philosophy and social and political theory, of course, but most of the time Taylor isn't just or mainly talking to them. He is also addressing ordinary people who feel the conflicts and malaises of modernity somewhere within themselves. Some of these readers will be drawn to philosophies of liberation, and it is these readers *above all*, I would suggest, that are the addressees of Taylor's philosophy. And having such addressees is surely vital if critical theory is to realize its interest in emancipation.

Endnotes

[1] This is explicit in many of Taylor's contributions to *Universities and Left Review*, *New Left Review*, *Canadian Dimension* and *Cité Libre* in the 1950s and 60s.

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