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A Reply to Gaon

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Stella Gaon (2017) places her remarkable critical review of *Dieter Misgeld: A Philosopher's Journey from Hermeneutics to Emancipatory Politics*, a collaborative book of interviews edited by Hossein Mesbahian and Trevor Norris, under the title “Philosophy as Subversion.” For both directly and indirectly, this is the theme of her interpretive and incisive critical discussion. For Gaon, philosophy, when understood as critique (and theory, as in “critical theory”), does not permit a sharp distinction between itself and politics. She attributes the latter distinction to me, arguing that I consistently claim the separateness of one from the other, thus neglecting their dialectical interdependence.

Gaon presents a very lucid, even if brief, account of Max Horkheimer’s seminal essay from the 1930’s, entitled “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937/2002), which served as a benchmark for identifying a form of theorizing neither following the tradition of disinterested speculative philosophy nor the newly emerged Marxist philosophy proclaimed to be the official doctrine of the new revolutionary state (the Soviet Union). Horkheimer defined “theory” (a term, so argues Gaon, taking the place of “philosophy”) as critical, because its task was to interrogate political reality, while “traditional theory” (or philosophy) separated the theorist from reality (social and political).

Gaon states—also with reference to Adorno—that “one must therefore always take issue ... with the kind of thinking” (2017, p. 404) that supports or advocates for this kind of separation. She believes she escapes it by interpreting theory in the sense described as “necessarily subversive and disruptive, if it is done rigorously” (p. 404). And, with some justification, she observes that I indirectly acknowledge this role of theory, and certainly endorse much of Horkheimer, even if I (as she states), may not have grasped all the ramifications of endorsing this role of theory, given that it is not outside politics, nor the “political” outside it.

Fundamentally, I have no quarrel with Gaon’s clarifications and criticisms of my position. Her elegant and incisive review lets me see more clearly what Norris and Mesbahian and I were discussing in 2005, and what we did not examine in our far-ranging and often improvised discussions. Nevertheless, I was mindful of the fact that 2005 is not 1937, when Horkheimer, already living in exile, published his essay. We cannot even aspire to the hope for a major social transformation which Horkheimer and his friends had maintained, even after the arrival of Nazism, and which they only rescinded when Adorno and Horkheimer had completed the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in California in 1944.

It is against this background that Habermas introduced the formula of the “completion of modernity” in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), specifically reviving aspirations for a philosophy that might renew hopes for a more egalitarian and profoundly democratic society. Gaon ironically and almost sarcastically distances herself from this formula, taking it too literally rather than just as a conceptual image. And as an image it may help us grasp what the relation is of emancipatory politics to theory.

Theory is implicit in emancipatory politics; or rather, theorizing. It simply consists of imaginary projections, to be revised as circumstances demand. It is for this reason that I took a step back from

“philosophy” as “theory” writ large. Whether such *ad hoc* theorizing would be subversive or not would be determined from case to case and circumstance to circumstance—but always guided by *one* overall norm: to contribute to the reduction of human suffering wherever possible or, at least, not to contribute to adding to it.

In this sense, one might want to think of theorizing as an act of *ad hoc* intervention, driven by a recognition of principles, and as a form of resistance. Perhaps this comes close to Stella Gaon’s endorsement of theory as subversive, including subverting inherited practices of theoretical reflection. But then one could read Habermas’ theorem of a “discourse without domination” (to choose an early formulation of his anticipating the metaphor of the “completion of modernity”) in a similar way: a conceptual image for what might be which ought not to be subjected to a literal reading.

The principle of interpretational flexibility which Gaon ascribes to Derrida at the end of her text, referring to Derrida’s re-readings of Heidegger, can also be applied to Habermas and some of the conceptual formulae which he has employed in order to invite his readers to place his thought in a history of left wing or progressive thinking which does not conceal its almost obscured roots in the work of Karl Marx. This is not at all the same as relying on specific Marxian or Marxist theorems or analyses.

Is this major origin of much modern (and sometimes postmodern) progressive thought something we want to banish altogether from the discourse of modernity entering into postmodernity, such that we no longer know who and what to be subversive of and why? I hope not.

Thus I do not deny that, for the sake of emancipatory politics, some kind of reflection or analysis is needed in order to answer the questions raised above. This kind of reflection might best be called “problematisation” (following Paulo Freire and his 1970 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, if I recall correctly). Of course, it would fall short of the projects of comprehensive theory that critical theorists had once pursued (Habermas quite explicitly) or longingly alluded to (Adorno). As critical reflection, it would be oriented to specific circumstances and situations, thus making good, at times, on the promise of emancipation whenever and wherever it can.

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