

Squatting Critical Theory: A Conversation with Rahel Jaeggi

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Abstract

Rahel Jaeggi is one of the leading figures of contemporary Critical Theory. In November 2023, she visited Argentina on occasion of the celebration of the I National Conference of Critical Theory, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt am Main. In the present interview, which was conducted during her days in Buenos Aires, she engages in a productive dialogue about her biography, the development of her work, her account of social critique, the current state of Critical Theory, and issues related to capitalism and colonialism.

Keywords: contemporary critical theory, Frankfurt School, critique, Hegel, philosophy of history

At the beginning of November 2023, Rahel Jaeggi visited Buenos Aires to participate as the keynote speaker in the I National Conference of Critical Theory. Commemorating the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt am Main, this event aimed to bring together scholars and activists from Latin America and around the world to reflect on and discuss the complex relationships

between Critical Theory of society and a Global South country like Argentina. As is well known, the funds needed to establish the renowned Institute at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University Frankfurt in 1923 came from the Weil Family's business in the field of agricultural trade, based in this South American country.

At the Conference, Jaeggi not only delivered a lecture on the standpoint of emancipation but also participated in a decentered dialogue between the Global North and South, seeking to address the past, present, and possible futures of Critical Theory. As part of this unique dialogue, we had the opportunity to interview her and engage in a conversation about her biography, her work, her notion of social critique, the current state of Critical Theory, and the issues of capitalism and colonialism.

First of all, we would like to ask you a biographical question. How and when did you start becoming interested in philosophy in general and Critical Theory in particular? Which thinkers were influential at the beginning of your intellectual life?

R.J.: Those are complicated questions because it all started very early. I was 14 years old when I dropped out of high school. And I was part of a social movement in Berlin, the squatting movement, which at that time was very powerful. We had 150 houses that were squatted, and it was not just a matter of people secretly squatting; they actually lived in them. It was really a huge movement. I became involved in this movement, I moved out of my family house, and drop out of high school. But it was not only about the houses, not only about the right to the city and gentrification. Gentrification was not even much of an issue. It was also about living together in a different way. The kind of confrontation that was aimed at was radical. It was about changing everything. The habit was that every time we just squatted a house, we would also publish shorts statements telling people what we wanted there, and so on... We said: "it is not just about this house, not just about housing in the neighborhoods. The next step will be to squat schools, to squat everything, factories," and so on...

In which city was that?

R.J.: In Berlin. This threw me into a totally different kind of life, of course. I did not go to school anymore. I was 14 years old. This explains how I came across different kinds of philosophers. One thing I remember is that we had a group of support for prisoners. A lot of people we were living with ended up in prison. So, we had this group and at some point someone suggested: “oh, there is this guy Foucault; we should read Foucault’s *Discipline and Punishment*.” We actually read Foucault in the group. Of course, we also did practical work, as it is always the case because this movement was not very theoretical. That was the point when people said: “it is not worth to argue about the last footnote in Marx, we should do something.”

When exactly was that?

R.J.: Early 80s. So, the movement itself was not theoretical; there was no one who would have thought that one should first read books or agree upon like a theoretically well-founded position. That was the period when everyone was somehow fed up with the radical left of the seventies. There were a lot of struggles about theories that led to nothing. This was the assumption that the autonomous movement then had. It is just about *doing, let’s do something*. So, not everyone was interested in theory. But some people in our group were, and started reading Foucault in order to understand what we were even doing or what kind of an institution the prison is, and so on. Since I am not so much of a Foucauldian now, it is interesting that that was actually one of the first philosophical books I have read and...

R.J.: Was it already translated into German?

Yes, yes, everything was translated. Foucault was already sold on the streets. We had this tradition of selling illegal copies. Foucault was very popular back then.

R.J.: It is interesting that you needed to study theory because of a practical issue, because of a practical conflict.

As I said, I did not go to school. One of my very good friends in the community I lived in was an on and off student. He started to study philosophy. Then he gave it up because of all the things we were involved in. Sometimes, I attended seminars without being a student. One of the really influential books for me was *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which I studied intensively. And then I even started to read Freud, Weber, Nietzsche, and Marx in order to understand that book. I have to confess that I only read *Odysseus* because of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. There were a bunch of books I needed to read in order to understand *Dialectic of Enlightenment*... That was another formative thing for me. Then, at some point – and this was rather late – I studied Marx and *Capital* more seriously. There were huge lecture classes at the University, where everyone could come. But we also had a little group that was part of the more political scene in which we also studied *Capital*. Then, one of the classes I took was on Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, which had a deep influence on me.

At a certain point, I decided I wanted to make a degree, that I wanted to study. As you know, all these movements have ups and downs, and I was involved in a lot of things. I was also working in a movie theater as a projectionist. And at a certain point, I just realized: “okay, I am not going to do this for the rest of my life.” That was something very common in our scene. But this was of course a way of life that was somehow dependent on the fact that rents were so low. People could do this. But, anyway, I did not think that this would be sustainable at the long run. I really thought I should find something I should do, something that I was really interested in. And I have always known that I wanted to study philosophy. So, I decided to take an external exam at high school. I mean, I did not want to go back to school because I really hated school; I did not want to have anything to do with it. There was the possibility to just take an external exam. And this is why I am a big fan of libraries because they are my way to get discipline, which is not so easy if you live the kind of life I was living back then. What I did was to just go to the library every morning. There, I found people who knew a bit more about the stuff I had to learn, like math and physics, and so on.

At this point, I read a lot of Hannah Arendt, almost everything she wrote. I am also very much of a Hegelian. I studied Hegel seriously, and also Marx. But Hannah Arendt was the only author I was always involved in. I read all her letters. For some reason, I was also interested in her as a person. And then, when I first studied philosophy, I also focused on Hannah Arendt and wrote my MA thesis on Arendt and Heidegger. Hannah Arendt was also the reason for reading Heidegger. So, this is how I first came across Heidegger. One should read Heidegger in order to understand what is at stake with Arendt, and I did a lot of Heidegger then. I have never taught it since that time. This was some of a weird mix and, I would say, there is still some of that mix in my thinking. I have not written about Hannah Arendt for a while. But I did publish my MA thesis as a book and I wrote some articles on her. I am sometimes still invited to Hannah Arendt conferences. It is not so much like openly in the focus of my thinking, but I would still say there is this a strong influence by Arendt at work.

You have written and published four monographs, right? Welt und Person, about Hannah Arendt, from 1997, Alienation, that was your PhD thesis, from 2005, Critique of Forms of Life, from 2013, and there is this new book, Fortschritt und Regression...

R.J.: Out in December, finally... I read the second run of proofs while I was in Vermont a couple of weeks ago, and now it is in print.

Could you tell us how your ideas changed or evolved from one book to the other?

R.J.: My Arendt book ends with a chapter on alienation in Marx and Hannah Arendt. And then, I decided to write a book on alienation, which does not discuss either Marx or Arendt that much. I discuss Heidegger and Marx, actually, but very briefly. However, I decided to do it in a completely different way, which does not focus on reading the classics. But still, the issue of alienation was already of interest to me when I wrote the last chapter of the Arendt book. I was interested in

the way Hannah Arendt misunderstood Marx. She misunderstood a lot about his concept of labor, and so on. I took my cue here from the fact that she said: “yes, Marx is focusing on self-alienation, but it should be alienation from the world.” She has this idea of world-alienation. I think Hartmut Rosa uses it as well.

Yes, he uses that idea in his book Resonanz.

R.J.: The concept in German is *Entfremdung*. And it also implies an “alienation from the world.” And then I thought, “okay, in one sense, she is right.” However, she is also wrong. The young Marx speaks of alienation in labor and from the products of activity, and so on. It is alienation from the world because work is the productive world, productivity. So, she is totally wrong. And I think she then only referred to the young Marx. In another sense, however, she is right – the idea of *Entäußerung* is the idea that what I see in the product of my own labor is not me, albeit it should be me. In Hegel, it was with respect to the realization of spirit; in Marx, with respect to the realization in labor. Then you might think: okay, if it is about the world, there is still a philosophical flaw in it because of the lack of the idea of action, which for Arendt was so important.

Here, pragmatism already came into my thinking, at least because of this interesting idea. What I take from Arendt here is that there is something you cannot predict, that is not just an outcome of what you intentionally plan, but is still something you relate to. The chapter was of course not only short, but also I did not know all these things. However, I thought there is something to Arendt and her proto-pragmatist critique of Marx. I was sure that Marx’s idea of alienation here holds in some way. And that one should somehow integrate the idea of action. And also, of course, the political. This was very much an issue when I wrote all those things. I mean radical democracy, like Laclau and a lot of neo-Marxists who would go against the assumption of harmony, the assumption that one could somehow overcome conflict in a certain way...

Behind the idea of alienation in Marx, there seems to be this assumption...

R.J.: Even the ideas of emancipation and alienation were somehow affected by this assumption. “Once we overcome alienation, we will live in a perfectly stable world...” My clue to the idea of political actions comes from Hannah Arendt, but I am a bit more critical about what some people did with it. However, the Arendt part in it is still something I found important.

And my next book was on alienation. In the alienation book, I tried to figure out how one could conceive of alienation without falling into the trap of essentialism and of a powerful self-transparent subject – the personal individual subject, or society as a subject. My work took a different turn somehow. I mean, even when I started to write my PhD thesis, I did that kind of exegetic work. I wrote like hundred pages because I was just trying to work myself through the classics, to connect Heidegger and Marx in some way, something a lot of people had already done before. At a certain point, I knew that was not going to work for me. I really needed to develop a new take. So, that was *Alienation*. Alienation is some kind of self-contradiction of liberal modernity. I think the promise of autonomy, of self-determination, is just systematically undermined.

But what is the normative criterion here? Why is alienation bad? Since in modernity we are all very fond of autonomy, this is a contradiction of modernity, and this is enough for criticism. In order to do more than this kind of what later on I called an internal critique, as against immanent critique, one needs to be able to criticize the form of life as such. I mean, the form of life of modernity. Or one should be able to define it in order to do more than just saying “okay, autonomy is a fact of modern lives.” This gives us enough ground to follow up on all those contradictions or undermining tendencies. So, in *Alienation* there is already the idea that to go further, one would need a critique of forms of life. Toward the end of *Critique of Forms of Life*, actually, there is already some talk on progress. What is a good form of life? It is a rational form of life of some sorts, namely, certain kind of accumulative learning

processes. And in a very modest way, one could call this progress. So, the next book is on progress.

The book on alienation was really inspiring for us because, in our academic field in Argentina, the concept was considered outdated as a consequence of all the criticisms of the 20th century. We also think the notion of alienation has a critical potential to study our current situation, especially new forms of subjective suffering...

R.J.: This is the reason why I started this alienation book and decided to do it from scratch. That is, to be somehow eclectic and to use this and that from analytical philosophy. When I first started to write this dissertation, everyone – I mean, I was a young PhD student back then – would say: “This is so outdated. How can you do this?” “you know, we are liberals now and alienation is a comprehensive doctrine that cannot be defended, and neither the idea of the good life...” The others would say: “we are post-structuralist now, we have abandoned the subject, what are you talking about?” So, that was really a difficult situation. No one was interested at that time in figuring out whether there was a useful concept of alienation in Marx. And I totally believed this was the case. Nowadays, many people write, for example, on the concept of *Gattungswesen*, species being. There is a new interest and people now dare to confront these issues.

In Potsdam, for example...

R.J.: In Potsdam, of course, but also everywhere. So, I think now it’s the time to work through Marx and Hegel. When I wrote the book, it was not the time. In order to even make a point or do it as an intervention, it was important to look at it in a new way somehow.

In academic terms, Alienation was your PhD thesis and Axel Honneth was your supervisor, right?

R.J.: Yes, he was my supervisor.

And this was at Frankfurt?

R.J.: Yeah, this was at Frankfurt. I mean, I had this position as a *wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin*...

We were thinking that the exercise that Honneth did with the idea of Verdinglichung is in some sense similar...

R.J.: Yes, it came out practically at the same time, but my PhD thesis was many years before.

2005, right?

R.J.: Yes, but I submitted the dissertation in 2000. By the way, with respect to all this, we can tell the story this way but it is also kidding because it is also somehow really arbitrary.

We can go to the next question – this is a long one. One of the issues that runs through your work is the nodal question “What is critique?” We can find this question in your book co-authored with Robin Celikates on social philosophy, as well as in the collective volumes you have co-edited with Tilo Wesche and Daniel Loick, and likewise in your works Alienation and Critique of Forms of Life. Especially in the latter, it seems your answer is decisively the model of immanent critique. We want to ask you about its philosophical grounding, especially its relation to the Hegelian category of “determinate negation” and to the question of historical dialectics in general. One could say that your recent reflections on the relation between moral progress and regression in history are also informed by a Hegelian-pragmatist reading of radical historical change. Could you share some methodological reflections on this discussion, so relevant in the history of Critical Theory, from Adorno to Honneth, as well as on the way criticism relates to history?

R.J.: It is a very good substantial question, and a very complex question as well. So, first of all, yes, I do. Somehow everything revolves around immanent critique, and I do defend a certain version of it. For me, it is very important to make this distinction between what I call mere internal critique and

immanent critique. You could also translate it into internal critique and, let's say, a Left-Hegelian kind of critique. But the interesting point here is that both share the idea that one should take the criteria for critique from within the social formation. Internal critique somehow trusts, let's say, the inherent normativity of a certain community and then somehow points toward the way they do not fulfill their own normative commitments. For this, you need not only trust but also a community with normative commitments that, at the same time, are good or emancipatory. So, there is a problem with this kind of internal critique, which a lot of people defend. It is the first step to take in many situations. I think Michael Walzer is one of the most prominent examples here. I also refer always to Oliver Stone, the filmmaker, who, in my view, is an internal critic. But, for me, this is too conservative, albeit not in a political way. I know that most of the people who practice this kind of critique are not conservative. I mean, Michael Walzer is not a conservative. But this is not a transformative critique. Of course, people have to rethink their normative commitments while realizing they do not fulfill them. The basic idea is: "you are defending human rights, but you let people drown in the Mediterranean," or: "you treat the refugees badly, even if you are a committed Christian." The idea is that one should somehow bring the institutions and practices, and the normative commitments together. However, in days of Trump and of your guy here, Javier Milei, some people are just cynically trying to bring norms and social practices together by giving up the very norms. A radical transformation is not in sight. So, I think immanent critique is a different kind of thing, and a lot of people mix them up. I mean, even Adorno. When you look at where he talks about immanent critique, you would find what I call internal critique. He is not conceptually consistent in this regard. It was not so important for him.

When you talk about this, you have in mind the liberal-communitarian debate, right?

R.J.: Yes, this is more or less a communitarian idea. So, immanent critique differs from the kind of critique I have just spelled out. First, because it seeks the systematic

contradictions within a social formation. So, it is not just: “okay, you only pay lip service to something and you should be more honest.” It is about deep-seated, systematic contradictions, a systematic way of not fulfilling one’s own commitments. It is about norms that are not just not fulfilled in a certain society but also, at the same time, somehow conservative. My main example here is the way Marx deals with freedom and equality in the bourgeois capitalist society. This is what I spelled out in my 2009 paper on ideology for the first time. The interesting thing here is not that bourgeois capitalist society only talks superficially, ideologically, about equality and freedom, but the fact that it is based on exploitation. The interesting thing about bourgeois capitalist society is that freedom and equality do play a conservative part. I mean, you would not have the double-free labor market in capitalism without the idea of a contract, a labor contract, which is based on the idea that people are somehow persons, independent, free, autonomous enough to even enter a contract...

It is a practical realization of the principle...

R.J.: It is a practical realization, but at the same time, it contradicts the very idea of freedom and equality. This is the kind of immanent critique, of ideology critique, I am interested in. I would say that even in the camp of immanent Left-Hegelian criticism, there might be two versions. I would not say two camps within the camp, but two versions. One is more positive, more interested in what Axel Honneth calls a reconstruction, a normative reconstruction. We share that we think positions are somehow rational. It is not just a contingent norm that shows up. You can go for the more positive reconstruction and look for the ways in which those justified, reasonable norms are already working in a certain social formation and work with this. What I prefer is maybe the more Marxian version. It depends on how you interpret Hegel. I would say Hegel is a crisis theorist as well. But you could also have this positive view: “Let’s try to figure out where reason is already in history, and this is where we work from.”

The other reading is the more negative way – there are contradictions, there are crises, there are tensions, there are

things that cannot be easily resolved. They are part of the structure and not just some random thing that will be solved in the long run. So, this is a more transformative mode of critique, and here the differences between the communitarian or internal way of critique come to the fore. This critique is transformative. In terms of immanent critique, you cannot solve the problem without transforming the whole formation. In order to live up to freedom and equality, it is not just that some people have to finally be a bit more serious about their norms, or some institutions have to be remodeled in order to live up, in Marxian terms, to the bourgeois ideas of freedom and equality. You have to transform the very norms. I mean, you have to have a revolution practically, which also means that the norms themselves will not just remain the same. This is the kind of immanent critique I go for.

In short this is an idea of immanent critique based on a crisis critique of society, which focuses on the negative aspects, on the way things do not work, or run into problems and enter into crises and contradictions. The foundation of critique then is a bit different. It is not a set of things we hold on to and we can defend as reasonable. It is more like the negativist way to go through unreason and history. I mean, the way in which, in capitalism, *Sittlichkeit*, the Hegelian ethical life, is distorted. It is there but in a distorted form. This kind of approach takes the burden of being related to some idea of philosophy of history. Let's say there is a transformation process in which institutions and social practices evolve, erode, and are being transformed because of a crisis dynamic.

So, this approach has to commit to some kind of, let's say, social theory that would take the narrative of a learning process – or of a Hegelian determinate negation. In some way, what I am doing is to spell out, once again, the idea of determinate negation. The dialectical negation, and also the idea of contradiction, so important here, is a very strict and demanding concept. I tried to inject some air into it. I mean, if you ask yourself what is a practical contradiction, there are different versions of it. It is not easy to spell out what it is. Perhaps not always this very strong idea of contradiction must be present. I connect it with the pragmatist idea of problem-

solving. I translated this idea into the dialectical process of experience led by determinate negation. And, at the same time, I leave some space for, let's say, a not so purely immanent contradiction. It brings in the idea of innovation, or the idea of political action, or contingency. So, I tried to spell out a concept that is not teleological in the bad way, led by a problem-solving process that is somehow away from those crises and problems. I mean, this is what I defend in the progress book. However, I would not buy into a very rigid idea of learning process. I open it up for a variety of functional equivalents to solve the question of how contingency comes into the picture without buying into "the everything is contingent" idea, which I find weak.

When you translate the logical dimension of the determinate negation into the practical realm of political action, it is inevitable not to think of the question of contingency, and the question of the new and the new beginning of actions. In your work, the pragmatist question of experimentalism gives us a tool to tackle this open dimension...

R.J.: Yes, exactly. I think those learning processes are not to be understood as just the unfolding of a principle that is already there. The very lazy reading of Hegel always accuses him of doing this. I mean, Dewey accuses him of doing this too. Even in Hegel, this is not the case because in the process of realization something happens. I find it interesting the way he conceives of the world-historical individual as someone who does the new, who is innovative, who has to come up with something new in order to change things.

And I would even say Marx's proletariat is somehow the world-historical individual because, in Hegel, this world-historical individual acts according to what is needed now, what the time needs. So, the proletariat is somehow the medium for a historical tendency – the crisis situation of the day. The proletariat translates this into some kind of action. But the action itself, I mean, whether it shows up, whether the proletariat is able to form this kind of collective class consciousness needed to enter class struggle, also depends on contingent matters and the contingent solutions you come up with for those problems in the crisis. There might be a variety

of solutions. Each of them leads to a different path. I think of this giving a bit more weight to contingencies, and also maybe to the fact that not every contradiction might lead to a crisis, which then leads to the kind of conflict needed to overcome the crisis. Sometimes, there are things that have more power than a strong contradiction.

What are your thoughts on the present situation of Critical Theory of society? We are curious about your general opinions on the current landscape of this centenarian tradition of thought, considering the various contributions made since Axel Honneth's crucial intervention, both in Germany and around the world. When we mention "Germany," we are encompassing not just Frankfurt but also, of course, what for example you are doing in Berlin. Similarly, when refer to the "world," we mean not only the cores of capitalism but also its peripheries.

R.J.: I think there are some obvious challenges for Critical Theory. It starts from the ecological crisis and the relation to nature, and it extends to the post-colonial situation, the relation to the Global South, and so on. There is not only the question of how to criticize capitalism, but also of how to lay some conceptual groundwork. In economic terms, how to conceive of the economy and the relation between economy and society, and this question cannot just be answered by going back to some kind of Marxism, which I am fine with. I am also interested in some fundamental systematic issues here. Of course, we should figure out financialized neoliberalism and the technological transformations we are going through. We need an idea of how this works and how this affects our lives today, and so on.

But there is also something it is about time to challenge – economic theory, at a more basic level. And this is a very hard challenge because since classical Critical Theory, economism has been a bad word. There are not many people who have enough knowledge. I am even criticizing myself. This is something that has been abandoned somehow. Of course, for a couple of years already, there have been some powerful voices in Critical Theory who discuss this. You might not realize this,

but like with alienation, the concept of capitalism was out of fashion as well. So, I remember the first talks I gave about capitalism and ways to criticize it, and I remember when Nancy Fraser started to talk about capitalism again. There was a liberal tendency, or then, again, a new post-structuralist, Foucauldian tendency, which would talk about regimes of a different nature, not about capitalism. So, it was not easy to even get back to the critique of capitalism. The thing is that Critical Theory as such is a critique of capitalism, and has always been that. When you look at the first generations, when Adorno writes about culture industry, even in his aesthetics, he gives a critique of capitalism of some sorts.

However, with the exception of some more or less forgotten figures, no one has actually engaged with the economy. Economy as economy. This was somehow led by Lukács and the reification thesis. It was always about how the economy affects the life-world. So, even before Habermas came up with the famous system/life-world distinction, there was somehow the tendency to focus on the way economy affects society. Economy was then seen as an alien part. The focus was on how it takes over society, on how it distorts forms of life, or does not. I try to take on another perspective that sees economy as a part of society, which is also normative. This is a point some people have made, that Habermas was wrong to see the economy as part of the system that is not normatively imbued, and so on. I think Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* did some harm to the situation. It is a great book and, in some way, the last book in Critical Theory that came up with a comprehensive and impressive social theory. However, he then left this field. So, he was criticized for the system/life-world distinction, but then he stopped working on it. And he went onto political philosophy, democracy theory, and so on.

So, the gap is not just about the economy. The other gap is social theory, and we still all hold on to the idea that what distinguishes Critical Theory from some kind of, let's say, left-wing Rawlsianism, is that a social theory or theory of society is involved. The stakes were high here. I think here, again, we have somehow a lacuna. There is also the idea that "there is no such thing as society as a whole, but only a set of conflictual

groups.” But there are people who somehow hold on to a Marxist theory of society. I think a lot of debate will be needed.

However, you were probably talking about political challenges. There are obvious political challenges, but there are also some theoretical-conceptual challenges here. It is about establishing a serious discussion about critiques of society, economy, and the question of nature. I find this interesting because a lot of Critical Theorists today would say: “yes, this is something we have to do or that we have failed to do,” as Axel Honneth said in a recent conference. But you can see that already some Critical Theorists are doing it. I do not want to be dogmatic with respect to Frankfurt School Critical Theory, and then also with the first and second generation, with the Left-Hegelian part of it. Well, maybe I am somehow dogmatic, but at the same time, it would be good just to spell out how Critical Theory, Frankfurt School, Left-Hegelian Critical Theory, has a very specific contribution to all those topics. And sometimes the stakes might be so high that you do not want to go through with it because, for example, you do not want to have the burden of a heavy theory, philosophy of history or something. Or you do not want to have the burden of a very expensive idea of reason. But at least we should try, with respect to the tradition, to spell it out, and to figure out how to reconstruct it and then confront it with critical theories in the plural sense.

I mean, there is some kind of lip service sometimes paid, like: “okay, so now we should integrate postcolonial thinking into Critical Theory; we have to do this with critical philosophy of race, feminism, and so on.” And I do think this is important. I mean, this is an idea of relation. Relation means that there are two distinguished positions that then are related or connected to each other, but I do not think it is good to just give up some things. I mean, when Marx says Critical Theory should always be part of the struggles and wishes of the age and also, of course, of the theoretical struggles and wishes of the age, I think it is important to see this as an attempt to be a critical partner here. Not only to say: “okay, so everything that goes on that is vaguely good or left” should be integrated.

The same holds, for example, for the idea that now we need a new concept of nature, and you should kind of reflect on

our relationship to nature. Some people say: “yes, Critical Theory has not done much on it”, which somehow is true, especially concerning the Kantian turn. Kantianism does not give itself easily to thinking about nature. But look at *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In that book, there are so many good resources for thinking about it. And what I find interesting is that they already had this. Or, at least, they raise the right kind of questions – not conceiving of nature in an instrumental way, and, at the same time, not giving way to some kind of re-enchantment of nature. Sometimes, in those new discussions where people bring up that we need a new ontology, and so on, I think this new ontology talk is not necessary. We do not need a new ontology in order to figure out that. And even in Marx, you have it. So, the interesting thing is the tension between two extremes: a re-enchanting nature and ontology that would not even allow for distinctions and so on, and the instrumental and exploitative version. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* already was somewhere in between. And it already had a strong critique of autonomy. It defended autonomy in more fashionable terms. It gives an idea of relational autonomy. And it also offers a critique of male dominance, I would say. Odysseus is like the mastermind of a male idea of how to control the world, how to be sovereign, and so on. So, there are a lot of things already there. Of course, I am not saying we just have to go back... This is not how I work, but it is important for Critical Theory to do both – to try to attract those resources and bring them into conversation.

There is an Argentine thinker, Eduardo Grüner, who says that he learned this difference between core and periphery, or center and periphery, not from the Latin American tradition of decolonial thinking or postcolonialism, or from the subaltern studies, but from the Critical Theory tradition and from Adorno, for example.

R.J.: Interesting...

We have a last question about post- and decolonialism...

R.J.: I am not such a specialist. But I would be actually interested in talking more about this at the Conference in Buenos Aires. When I talk about progress, I have a new way to react to some kind of questions. My idea, in the end, is that we would have a multiplicity of learning processes, and some of them interact and connect with each other. At the same time, my idea of learning processes is not giving a substantial but a somehow processual answer to what progress is, as I did in *Critique of Forms of Life*. A substantial account would place other people in the waiting room of history, as Chakrabarty says. And no one believes me; everyone thinks it is still like Western modernity that takes the lead in my thinking. So, I have found out a way to at least puzzle people a bit. I say: “did you know the fact that in some Brazilian tribes, or some societies, there have always been more than two genders?” This is like an anthropological fact. The dichotomy male/female was not valid in all societies. We are only now beginning to understand that gender is a spectrum. So, does this mean that those societies are more progressive than we are, or does it not? I would then argue that this depends. This can be judged from the substance – they already have fifteen genders and you are so stuck with your truth. But it is also about *the process* in which there is any development. And that sometimes puzzles my audience because I turn things around. It is like: “okay, the fact that we have autonomy here does not necessarily mean that everyone else is less advanced” because they might still end up valuing, cherishing autonomy. So, I found out that for that reason, at least, it is a very good point to make.

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