

NEW CONTRIBUTIONS FOR A NON-EUROCENTRIC CRITICAL THEORY



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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: It was in 1923, with the Erste marxistische Arbeitswoche [First Week of Marxist Academic Work] in the German state of Thüringen, that the first scientific structures were established that later led to the foundation of the Institut für Sozialforschung [Institute for Social Research] in the city of Frankfurt am Main. Today, more than a hundred years later, there are different ways of interpreting the relevance of this theoretical tradition. The easiest and most usual is to re-nationalize it in German culture and re-municipalize it in the cultural and scientific heritage of Frankfurt. However, it is still not possible to completely deny that Critical Theory could only be saved as a scientific and institutional project, just as its members could only save their lives by leaving Frankfurt, Germany and Europe as soon as possible. The only one who delayed his departure from this continent, Walter Benjamin, paid for it with his arrest in the Pyrenees, on the border of France with Spain and chose suicide in the face of the threat of being deported to Germany, that is, heading for the National Socialist extermination camps.

Keywords: Critical Theory. Not Eurocentrism. Decolonial Perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

It was in 1923, with the *Erste marxistische Arbeitswoche* [First Week of Marxist Academic Work] in the German state of Thüringen, that the first scientific structures were laid down, which later led to the foundation of the Institut für Sozialforschung [Institute for Social Research] in the city of Frankfurt am Main. Today, more than a hundred years later, there are different ways of interpreting the relevance of this theoretical tradition. The easiest and most usual is to re-nationalize it in *German culture* and *re-municipalize it* in the cultural and scientific heritage of Frankfurt. However, it is still not possible to completely deny that Critical Theory could only be saved as a scientific and institutional project, just as its members could only save their lives by leaving Frankfurt, Germany and Europe as soon as possible. The only one who delayed his departure from this continent, Walter Benjamin, paid for it with his arrest in the Pyrenees, on the border of France with Spain and chose suicide in the face of the threat of being deported to Germany, that is, heading for the National Socialist extermination camps.

Today all this seems a long way off, since it has been almost 80 years since the National Socialist popular project was militarily terminated by the Red Army and its allies at the time. The *re-nationalization* of this theory expelled from Germany celebrates more and more great successes and even conservative thinkers consider that Critical Theory is sufficiently domesticated, to be able to give it the seal of 'Made in Germany' and erect a monument in tribute to Theodor W. Adorno in the heart of the city of Frankfurt, as happened 21 years ago.²

In this context, there are few voices within the German university, and especially within the University of Frankfurt, that keep alive the radicalism of the criticism of the *Frankfurt School* of the twenties, thirties and forties of the last century. Some authors, and also several left-wing political activists in Germany and other countries, consider Axel Honneth, who today occupies the chair left by Jürgen Habermas when he retired, to be the most important institutional representative of the desire to rescue or re-energize the theoretical-scientific project of Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Löwenthal, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer and, *last but not least*, Walter Benjamin.

² On September 10, 2003, one day before the 100th anniversary of his birth, a monument dedicated to Theodor W. Adorno was unveiled in Frankfurt am Main. The monument was erected in a square that bears his name since 1995, a few meters from the *Institut für Sozialforschung*.

In circles of feminist, anti-racist, pro-third-world intellectuals and activists critical of the dominant model of so-called globalization, references to Honneth were frequent and in many cases his writings were looked upon favorably. First of all, his reflections on the Hegelian theory of *recognition*, as well as his own contributions to an interpretation of it, were (and sometimes are) received as basic for the analysis of the processes of exclusion and domination of minority groups or treated as minorities. In addition, this theory was seen as a starting point for reflection on the possibilities and concrete forms of resistance to (or overcoming these forms of exclusion and domination).³

For these reasons, Axel Honneth, professor-researcher at the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the Goethe University in Frankfurt, seems to us the ideal author to begin a reflection on the situation of Critical Theory at the beginning of the Third Millennium. This reflection is based on a critical vision of the aforementioned attempt to 'reintegrate' Critical Theory into the city from which it was expelled by the National Socialists from Frankfurt and from all of Germany – expulsion, as a last *alternative* to physical extermination – carried out with the active or silent passive approval of the vast majority of the inhabitants of the city and the country. And for the same reason we do not think that the mere fact that an author is physically and institutionally present at the University of Frankfurt almost

³ Although Honneth tries to overtake Hegel on the left, it is not certain whether this attempt does not turn into its opposite: by attempting to give a *strong* and *fighting reading* to Hegel's concept of recognition, he minimizes Hegel's tone of doubt and hesitation in formulating it. In the text of the German philosopher, it is not only a concept that can be understood as the basis of a society of individuals who mutually recognize each other (in the style of utopia in the *theory of communicative action* of the teacher and precursor of Honneth in the chair of the Goethe University of Frankfurt, Jürgen Habermas), but at the same time – and predominantly – it is a critical concept that describes oppressive reality as a historical (and not eternal) one: the king is the king not by divine will or predestination, but because he is recognized as such by subordinates. There is a tendentially revolutionary element – inspired by the *Grande Révolution* – in the Hegelian concept of recognition that is lost in Honneth's interpretation of the *struggle for recognition*: recognition (of the current king/oppressor) can be withdrawn, cancelled, annulled by the oppressed as always, and at this very moment the current king/oppressor becomes one *more*. While in Hegel there is – at least implicitly – the possibility of thinking about revolution, in Honneth we all only aspire to be a multitude of petty rulers, even if it is of our own mediocrely controlled life. What Foucault describes critically with his concept of *gouvernementalité*, becomes a supposedly desirable utopia in Honneth: we are all recognized, that is, we are all small micro-bosses, or micro-entrepreneurs, or we would have all our micro-changaros as *visionarily* said former President Vicente Fox when announcing phase two of the massive impoverishment of the Mexican population. (The difference between Honneth and Habermas, on the other hand, is that the master – perhaps because he lived through the era of National Socialism and because he has a deep anti-fascist conviction – knows that his theory of communicative action is a utopia and announces it veiledly by insisting that he starts from presuppositions *Against the facts*, the disciple Honneth naively believes his own fantasy of *recognition* as realizable even within the limits of the society and social form that made possible the *best* organized and carried out genocide in human history. Compare: Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, Madrid, Taurus, 1987, as well as G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. Wenceslao Roces with the collaboration of Ricardo Guerra, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966, especially chapter IV: "The truth of self-certainty", subchapter A 3: "Lord and servant". On *gouvernementalité* see: Thomas Lemke, Susanne Krasmann, Ulrich Bröckling: *Governmentality: current issues and future challenges* New York, NY, Routledge, 2011.)

automatically gives him a greater closeness to Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Benjamin and the other authors of the so-called *classical* Critical Theory.

The aim of the following 34 theses is, instead, to demonstrate that an author, Bolívar Echeverría, a prominent Ecuadorian-Mexican philosopher (1941-2010) who was born and was attached to a university outside Frankfurt, outside Germany, even outside Europe and – it seems almost crazy – even outside the self-declared First World (the UNAM), can be considered, in all seriousness and respecting the academic game, more relevant than the *known premises* for the project of a Critical Theory at the beginning of the third millennium. This purpose, equally unusual within the discussions on Critical Theory as within the discussions on the so-called Third World in general, and Latin America in particular, will be organized from the conceptual confrontation of Walter Benjamin, Axel Honneth and the aforementioned Latin American author, Bolívar Echeverría.

The latter has taught for many years at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, making the Critical Theory of Society accessible to many generations of students, has helped to understand its philosophical, social and historical context, and has made important contributions for an expansion of the validity of Critical Theory, not only beyond the precise historical moment in which its central texts emerged, but also beyond the geographical and civilizational limitations, in which this theory – despite its great openness in many topics – has sometimes been trapped. These limitations in part result directly from some contradictions and limitations of the original texts, which were developed in an ethnocentric context, which has never been overcome by the authors of this group of intellectuals as decisively as would have been necessary. Most of the aforementioned limitation, however, is the result of a process of interpretation of these texts that in many cases removed the critical thorn, and with it also the ability to overcome the narrow-mindedness of European and American society – a narrow-mindedness that practically always includes an ethnocentrism that is as ridiculous as it is insistent.

Bolívar Echeverría has been one of the authors who have worked for many years in the attempt to take up the project of Critical Theory, taking it not only to other countries, but also to new horizons of discussion, which included a debate beyond the limitations given in many European and American universities – which are also due to the limitations that are necessarily generated in countries that, for years, they have been at war against other countries. For all these reasons, it seems justifiable and necessary to us to take up this important author – who died fourteen years ago – and to compare his thought with one of

the current professors of philosophy at the University of Frankfurt, who in turn serves today as director of the *Institut für Sozialwissenschaften*, an institution founded by the authors of Critical Theory, which in turn was the place in which Critical Theory began to develop at the end of the twenties and beginning of the thirties of the last century.

1. The Hegelian theory of recognition in Axel Honneth's interpretation is implicitly based on the idea that the recognition of the other is *possible* in the existing social form. It naively overlooks the fact of competition in the reigning economic system, in which anyone is by definition in competition with anyone.

2. In this vision there is a 'struggle for recognition' that can lead in specific cases to the recognition of oneself or of a group by another or others. Cases of non-recognition are considered violations of the basic rule that sometimes lead to resistance. The *possibility* that non-recognition is the rule and recognition the accidental or temporary exception is not considered in this theory.

3. The Hegelian theory of recognition, and even more so the interpretation given by Honneth, have a very marked progressive feature. In Honneth's version of Hegel's theory, he starts, without any material or historical justification, from the premise that in history there is a continuous advance towards a society with full recognition of the other. Hegel, at least in certain parts of his theory, knows how doubtful this belief in human progress as necessary and inevitable is. In certain phrases Hegel seems ironic with himself, as for example in his *Philosophy of Right*, when he speaks of the monarch and war.⁴

⁴ Hegel is aware that the whole system of recognition as a rational process ends at the borders of nation states.

See on this for example: "Eternal peace is often demanded as an ideal to which humanity must turn. Kant proposed a league of monarchs that was to arbitrate the conflicts of the States and the Holy Alliance was to be approximately such an institution. Only the State is individuality and in individuality is essentially contained negation. If, therefore, a number of states also become a family, this unity as an individuality must create an opposition and engender an enemy." (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Fundamental features of the philosophy of law. O compendium of natural law and science of the State*. Trans. Eduardo Vásquez. Caracas, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1976, § 324, addendum, p. 325. Original: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*. With the notes of Hegel's hand and additions according to his living voice. New edition, reworked on the basis of the works [Werke] of 1832-1845. Written by: Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1970., *loc. cit.*, § 324, addendum, pp. 493 ff.)

Here there is no space to enter further into the discussion of this problem. See our most developed reflections in this regard: Stefan Gandler, *Frankfurt Fragments. Essays on Critical Theory*. México, D.F., Siglo XXI Editores, 2009. 143 pp., 1st reprint 2009, especially chapter 3: "The problem of the State. Marcuse and his interpretation of Hegel", pp. 85-106.

Honneth goes over this problem, already discussed by his great example Hegel, and with some consequence supports several of the wars that the states of the center have waged against certain states of the periphery in recent years, such as the war in Yugoslavia, as the *only way to implement reason* in "irrational countries" from the self-declared "traditionally rational" countries.

4. In Honneth these self-critical moments of Hegel's theory are eliminated and replaced by a moralism of progress, or in other words: a faith in the progress of morality. He states that "as we have seen, the legal relationship [Rechtsverhältnis] and the community of values are open to the processes of a transformation in the direction of an increase in universality or equality [Egalität]".⁵ It does not consider the possibility of an opening of the existing system of law and morality to the opposite of an 'increase of universality and equality'. But the history after Hegel gave even more elements to doubt this belief in human progress, in which Honneth does not want to stop trusting when "describing the history of social struggles as a process with a defined direction."⁶

5. This blindness to the possibility of 'progress' towards a complete absence of recognition is all the more problematic if we consider that it occurs in Germany, at a shorter time than a human lifetime, after the destruction of the European Jews by the German National Socialists.⁷ Or to put it another way: only by closing his eyes to the reality of his own country can Honneth formulate his theory of recognition.

6. Implicitly, Honneth gives us to understand that less traditional societies are closer to the "finality of human self-realization"⁸ than traditional societies, when he insists throughout his text on the "idea of a post-traditional relationship of recognition."⁹ This is not only questionable because National Socialism took place in one of the least traditional societies in the world at the time: Germany; but also because it falls into the ideological trap of the Nazis that they share with all far-right movements. They present themselves as the great redeemers of lost traditions or in the process of being lost, while in their real politics they support the most radical technological and organizational modernizations. At

⁵ Honneth, Axel, *Der Kampf um Anerkennung. On the moral grammar of social conflicts*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1994, p. 280. Original: "As has been shown, both the legal relationship and the community of values are open to processes of transformation in the direction of an increase in universality or equality."

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 274. Original: "to describe the history of social struggles as a directed process".

⁷ It should also be remembered that this occurred after the democratic phase of the Weimar Republic, when Hitler was democratically elected as head of the German government and subsequently endowed with absolute powers – the Ermächtigungsgesetz – also by the votes of the majority of the democratic parties, the centre, the Catholic centre and even the majority of the Social Democratic deputies.

We cannot go into this place in depth about this generalized *lack of memory*, which coincides today with a constant growing murmur about National Socialism, but we have discussed it elsewhere: Stefan Gandler, "On the Generational Impact of Claude Lanzmann's Film." In: *Desacatos. Journal of Social Anthropology*. México, D.F., Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, número 29, enero-abril 2009, pp. 159-170. Also on the internet: <http://www.ciesas.edu.mx/desacatos/29%20Indexado/Legados.pdf>. On the participation of Jürgen Habermas in this *silent speaking* – which also includes Honneth – see: Stefan Gandler, *Frankfurt Fragments, loc. cit.*, "Liminal Words", pp. 9-16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 276. Original: "Purpose of human self-realization."

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 275. Original: "Idea of a Post-Traditional Relationship of Recognition".

the same time, they destroy a large part of the existing traditions, politically and ideologically constructing a so-called *traditionalism*.

7. This confusion of *tradition* with *traditionalism*, which is one of the classic errors of the reformist and Stalinist left, is shared by Honneth, as if he had never understood Walter Benjamin's central idea, according to which it is necessary, in every generation, "the attempt to wrest tradition from the hands of conformism, which is always on the verge of subduing it."¹⁰ It is not only a question here of the "tradition of the oppressed,"¹¹ but of tradition in its entirety. Throughout its history, the left has repeatedly made the mistake of identifying *tradition* with *traditionalism*. This error is directly related to the idea of progress in history, of which the left would be a 'natural' ally. Everything that was left behind is, in this logic, what must be overcome, from which we must distance ourselves. Benjamin, one of the most relevant authors to whom Honneth refers when he considers himself part of the 'third generation of the Frankfurt School', criticizes this conception and also the idea of a linear time that advances just as clocks make us believe that they only stop when one forgets to wind them or change the battery. It does not accept this identification of tradition and traditionalism, in which the left and the right are more alike than they would be willing to admit.

8. The left in its positivist versions (the reformist and the Stalinist) starts, like the bourgeois tendencies, from the idea that tradition is always on the side of the conservatives and rightists. If certain groups on the left try to include aspects of local tradition in their programmes, they will do so not with the idea of a radicalisation of their political position, but as a tactical approach to positions of the right or the conservatives.

It is unthinkable within a progressive and economistic ideology that in the existing tradition there is always a rebellious and subversive heritage, not only in the "tradition of the oppressed", but also in the traditions that tried to guarantee a good life and develop human capacities and needs, beyond immediate economic needs. It is unimaginable for the positivist left, as well as for the conservatives, that precisely what *slows down* technological, organizational and economic progress could be in favor of a revolutionary project. This is why the left almost always had and has serious problems, when it comes to

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Sobre el concepto de historia", en: W.B., *Tesis sobre la historia y otros fragmentos*. Trad. Bolívar Echeverría. México, Itaca/Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México, 2008, pp. 31-59, aquí: p. 40. Original: "In every epoch one must try to win the tradition anew from the conformism that is about to overwhelm it." (Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", en: W.B., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I, 2. 2ª ed., Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1978, pp. 693-704, aquí: p. 695.)

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *loc. cit.*, p. 43.

understanding or even supporting the petitions of minority groups¹², since they usually present one too many turns in the channel within which the river of national progress runs. There are countless examples, but one only has to remember the problems that the Sandinistas had in Nicaragua to accept the requests of the indigenous groups, several of which ended up as allies of the contras, as well as the case of Mexico, where before 1994 a decisive part of the left did not give much importance to the situation of social exclusion. linguistic and civilizational of indigenous societies and their struggles.

9. In Mexico it was only after the appearance of the *neo-Zapatistas* that there arose an awareness within the left that the struggle for a less repressive and less exploitative society is necessarily at the same time a struggle against the marginalization and exclusion of traditions that are not subsumable under the classic concept of the 'Mexican' or the 'Mexican'. just as it was established in a progressive zeal¹³ in the last two centuries.

This group is perhaps one of the first to try to openly unite these two aspects: on the one hand, the defense of tradition, which is in danger of being crushed by the tendency of the capitalist form of reproduction to destroy the differences that do not fit into its declaration of the equality of all commodities, and, on the other hand, the defense of tradition. therefore, of all those who are willing to reduce themselves to mere producers of them. On the other hand, this group tries to take up the old emancipatory ideals of a fairer, more egalitarian society, etc.

10. The eternal discussions that have been observed for some years on the question of whether to give preference to demands for *equality* or to those for *difference*, are only possible because of this false contradiction that is constructed in the dominant thought between tradition and emancipation. All the claims, now fashionable, of being against progressivism and economism, are in vain, if one does not get to the question of tradition as something to be "torn away... at the hands of conformism."¹⁴

11. To take up tradition in a non-folkloristic way could be what Walter Benjamin calls the "tiger leap into the past",¹⁵ but this leap does not mean moving away from the possibility of a society radically different from the existing one and its destructive and

¹² This of course also includes groups that are not numerically in the minority, but in terms of political or economic power they are, see, for example, the cases of marginalization and exclusion carried out in patriarchy and apartheid.

¹³ In the sense of a (naïve) faith in progress.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *loc. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

repressive structures, but "that dialectical leap (...) it is revolution, as Marx understood it."¹⁶ To be a revolutionary would then imply the ability to remember, to see and learn from past generations, from their experiences and traditions. The simple fixation on the supposed 'modernizations' closes the way to this leap of the tiger. The prescriptions of the reformist and Stalinist left in the former colonies to first *overcome* the *remnants* of traditional societies, that is, to resemble the societies of the center, as a prerequisite for being able to enter the project of a radically less repugnant society, are based on this false conception of the role of traditions. The neo-Zapatistas are perhaps the group that sees most clearly the need for this *leap of the tiger* into the past and it is no coincidence that they do so from the most remote corner of Mexico, apparently from the political and civilizational 'place' furthest from this other less repressive society – farther away because they are, at first glance, *traditionalists*, by defending several of their *apparently* 'obsolete' traditions in Mexico in the 21st century.

12. Bolívar Echeverría's theory of the four *ethes*¹⁷ of capitalist modernity, and especially his analyses of the baroque ethos as a *modern* and non-pre-modern one, could be one of the few theoretical attempts that today managed to take up this analysis of Walter Benjamin, which is generally - despite being frequently cited - marginalized in the current socio-philosophical debate. The conception of the baroque ethos as one that contains a "conflictive combination of conservatism and nonconformity"¹⁸ could be precisely one of the keys to understanding the type of modernity that exists in Mexico, not as *backward*, but different and perhaps in certain aspects even more interesting for the project of a society less repressive, exploitative and repugnant than the existing one. that the modernities of the *First World* that the party and 'official' left (whatever remains of it), like the conservatives, naively want to copy.

13. Bolívar Echeverría starts from the analysis that capitalist modernity is profoundly contradictory and irrational. A conclusion of this would be the one we mentioned at the beginning: the recognition of the other is systematically hindered and in the best of cases only possible in exceptional situations.

¹⁶ *Idem*. There is no space here to expand on this important debate on the concept of "tradition". We have tried it elsewhere: Stefan Gandler, *Frankfurt Fragments, loc. cit.*, chapter 2 "Interruption of the historical continuum in Walter Benjamin" (pp. 37-84).

¹⁷ Plural of *ethos*.

¹⁸ Bolívar Echeverría, "El Ethos Barroco", in: B.E. (ed.), *Modernidad, mestizaje cultural, ethos barroco*. Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/El Equilibrista, pp. 13-36, here: p. 26. See thesis 7, where the difference between tradition and traditionalism is clarified. Traditionalism usually coincides with conservatism, the defense of tradition not necessarily, but it can be a rebellious and anti-conservative act.

14. Here we can observe a great closeness between Bolívar Echeverría and Walter Benjamin, one of the main authors of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Benjamin is convinced that *exception* and *rule* exist in the reigning social form in an inverse relation to what is believed, including what Honneth thinks. Benjamin writes in his text "On the Concept of History": "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception' in which we now live is indeed the rule. The concept of history that we arrive at must be coherent with this. Promoting the true state of exception will then be presented to us as our task, which will improve our position in the struggle against fascism."¹⁹

15. Despite the fact that Honneth declares himself a member of the so-called third generation of the Frankfurt School, Bolívar Echeverría is much closer to his main ideas than Honneth. Echeverría's theory would be much more of a contribution to an update of this theoretical tradition than Honneth's writings.

16. Echeverría distinguishes four basic types of existing capitalist modernity, each one corresponding to a version of the "ethos of capitalist modernity". In one of them, the *baroque ethos*, there is more room for *exceptions* than there is in the others. In general, this greater space for exceptions is interpreted from the perspective of the other three ethe of capitalist modernity, as an expression of a *lack of rationality*, of an *unfinished* or *incomplete* modernity, or even of a *pre-modern condition*.

17. Honneth's theory is inscribed, without his being aware of it, within the framework of one of these other three non-baroque ethe. It starts, without proving it argumentatively, from the possibility of the recognition of the other within current societies with a capitalist economic model. At the same time, he considers the attitude that Echeverría describes as *baroque* as inferior to the other three described by the Ecuadorian-Mexican author, because it is one that does not even pretend to seek recognition (in the Hegelian sense of the term) of the other, but 'simply' lets him live, lets him pass, coexists. In the style of the three non-baroque ethe, it belittles the baroque ethos for an (apparently) chaotic mixture of aesthetic, technical, gustatory and organizational ways of organizing everyday life, including economic and political. This mixture makes it difficult to define the *other* (and also the *self*), so that the process of recognition, as one that starts from a *self* and an *other*

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Sobre el concepto de historia", *loc. cit.*, p. 43. Original: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the >state of emergency< in which we live is the rule. We have to come to a concept of history that corresponds to this. Then our task will be to bring about the real state of emergency; and thereby our position in the fight against fascism will improve." (Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", *Loc. cit.*, p. 697.)

clearly defined in their difference, becomes non-functional, tendentially impossible and – what is most annoying for Honnethian theory – ultimately superfluous.²⁰

Before going into the discussion between Honneth and Echeverría, we are going to analyze some of the main features of Bolívar Echeverría's theory of the four ethe of capitalist modernity.

18. The concept of the *historical ethos* that Bolívar Echeverría introduces into the scientific discussion replaces in a certain way the critical concept of ideology and is intimately linked to his concept of political culture. Each of the different ethe of existing modernity implies a "peculiar way of living with Capitalism".²¹ More specifically, Echeverría explains that "structural social behavior, which we can call *historical ethos*, can be seen as a whole principle of construction of the world of life. It is a behavior that tries to make the unlivable livable."²² There, as well as in his formulation of the ethe of capitalist modernity as a "way of naturalizing the capitalist,"²³ there is an obvious closeness of the theory of the ethe to the critique of ideology.

19. Bolívar Echeverría currently distinguishes four basic ways of living "the unlivable" and calls them: the realistic ethos, the romantic ethos, the classical ethos and the baroque ethos. "In principle, there would be four different possibilities offered to experience the world within the form of capitalist reproduction; each of them would imply a peculiar attitude - either of recognition or ignorance, of distancing or participation - in the face of the contradictory fact that constitutes capitalist reality."²⁴ While the realist ethos predominates broadly and in vast spheres of north-central Europe and the United States, the baroque ethos has a certain presence (along with the globally dominant realist ethos) in Latin America and especially in countries such as Mexico. This baroque ethos, which from

²⁰ By the way: Honneth's fixation on the *self* and the *other* is not only distant, but opposed to the main ideas of Critical Theory. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, inspired by Freud and also by the Hegelian critique of the naïve concept of *identity*, Horkheimer and Adorno propose how the "I" is the last and most radical link in the process of alienation in the Enlightenment world under the – obviously – increasingly kind, peaceful and inclusive form of capitalist reproduction. (Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialectics of the Enlightenment. Philosophical fragments*. Trans. Juan José Sánchez. Madrid 1994: Ed. Trotta, especially chapter: "Concept of illustration", pp. 59-95.)

On Honneth's (and others') theoretical departure from Critical Theory, combined with an 'institutional' approach to the material and immaterial heritage – and in terms of reputation – of it, we have argued in more detail elsewhere, which cannot be further explored here for reasons of space. (Stefan Gandler, *Fragments of Frankfurt*, loc. cit., chapter 5: "*Historicized dialectics*. Ignoble Heirs of Horkheimer and Adorno", pp. 107-117.)

²¹ Bolívar Echeverría, "El Ethos Barroco", loc. cit., p. 20.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²³ Bolívar Echeverría, "Modernity and Capitalism. (15 theses)". In: B.E., *Las ilusiones de la modernidad*, Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/El Equilibrista, 1995, pp. 133-197, here: p. 164.

²⁴ Bolívar Echeverría, "El Ethos Barroco", loc. cit., p. 19.

the perspective of the *realist ethos*, is pre-modern and obsolete and only a remnant of ancient societies, is from the perspective of Bolívar Echeverría's theory a modern ethos among the four modern ethe currently existing.

20. The *historical ethe* or *ethe of capitalist modernity* are ways of living the unlivable, they are basically distinguished by their way of doing so. The concept of the historical ethos is very broad and includes everything from cultural forms in the narrow sense of the word to everyday ways of eating, organizing work or, in general, all forms of production and consumption of goods. It also includes ways of communicating, which Echeverría conceives as forms of production and consumption of meanings.

The Ecuadorian-Mexican author is interested in an explanation of the process of production and consumption of use values that resorts to semiotics, but without denying the primacy of nature, the primacy of the material as the inalienable foundation of the ideal. Here there is an essential difference compared to a series of contemporary approaches that are entangled in the concept of communication (or related conceptions, for example that of 'articulation') and see in its most diverse forms, real or imagined, the explanation and, at the same time, the salvation of the world.

To this end, he reinterprets, from the perspective of a critical Marxism, central theoretical elements of Ferdinand de Saussure, from whom he takes up important reflections to lay the foundations of his materialist theory of culture. In a relatively early text, which he considered one of his most important,²⁵ Echeverría makes an analysis that will be

²⁵ Personal communication in one of the countless meetings we had between the two of us, especially in the last seven years of his life. It is the following text: Bolívar Echeverría, "The 'natural form' of social reproduction". In: *Cuadernos Políticos*, Mexico, July-December 1984, no. 41, pp. 33-46. A revised and expanded version was published under the title "The 'Use Value': Ontology and Semiotics," included in: B.E., *Use Value and Utopia*. Mexico, Siglo XXI, 1998, 153-197. We have entered, elsewhere, in more detail into the discussion of the materialist theory of culture that Bolívar Echeverría was developing throughout his intellectual life. (Stefan Gandler, *Critical Marxism in Mexico. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Bolívar Echeverría*. Foreword: Michael Löwy. México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica / Facultad de Filosofía y Letras UNAM / Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, 2007, 621 pp. 1st reprint: 2008 [translation contributors: Marco Aurelio García Barrios and Max Rojas] , especially: "Third part, Bolívar Echeverría: Valor de uso y *ethos*", subchapter 11f: "Marxian concept of the *natural form* and the theory of *ethos*", pp. 316-320, and subchapters 12a: "Reproduction and communication" and 12b: "Use value and sign", pp. 324-342.) From our perspective, probably different from that of other performers, Echeverría has interrupted work on this central theme several times and his early death has prevented him from finishing it in the way he had planned. We believe that above all institutional pressures, inside and outside the UNAM, have distanced Echeverría from this project of a materialist theory of culture. Above all, the orientation towards the simplified differentiation between "American Modernity" and "European Modernity", developed within an institutional and representative framework too narrow for Bolívar Echeverría's way of thinking and working, has taken away from him the attention that would have required the completion of the very promising materialist theory of culture, which has been, without a doubt, one of the central projects of his theoretical life, probably the most important. Our last theoretical conversations developed around this turn that Echeverría gave to his theory of capitalist modernity. Starting from a quadruple model, which he had developed after 1989, he transforms it

decisive for the rest of his later work, especially for the development of the concept of historical ethos. While Saussure subordinates linguistics to semiotics (*sémiologie*)²⁶ and decides that knowledge of the "true nature of language" is only possible if it fits correctly into the more general field of "all other systems of the same order [tous les autres systèmes du même ordre]"²⁷ investigated by semiotics, Echeverría is interested in framing semiotics (understood by him as the production and consumption of signs) in the broader field of semiotics. production and consumption in general. It is evident that Saussure and Echeverría differ markedly from each other, since the former considers semiotics embedded in social psychology and this, in turn, in psychology in general, while Echeverría has as his system of reference the critique of political economy.²⁸ In this there is a parallelism between the two, for, in order to investigate the most general object, necessary to understand particulars, they start from the most complex of particular objects.²⁹

It is also important to be clear that the four modern ethe analyzed by Bolívar Echeverría are the ethe of *capitalist modernity*. None of them is outside of modernity or

from 2007 into a binary one, only apparently clearer. At some point we will have to take up this discussion, interrupted by his premature death, even if it is without the physical presence of the author of this philosophical turn, and we would have to try to understand if it also implied a changed political perspective on the current social reality of Latin America and the world.

²⁶"Linguistics is but one part of this general science. The laws that semiology discovers will be applicable to linguistics, and this is how linguistics will find itself linked to a well-defined domain in the totality of human facts." (Ferdinand de Saussure, *General Linguistics Course*. Trans. by Amado Alonso. Buenos Aires, Losada, 2001, p. 43.)

²⁷See: "For us [...], the linguistic problem is primarily semiological, and in this important fact our reasoning takes on significance. If one wants to discover the true nature of language, one must begin by considering it in what it has in common with all other systems of the same order." (*Ibid.*, pp. 44; original: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*. Critical edition by Tullio de Mauro, translation of Mauro's annotations into French by Louis-Jean Calvet, Paris, Payot, 1979. [1st ed. of the *Cours*: 1915], pp. 34 ff.)

²⁸"It is possible, therefore, to conceive of a science that studies the life of signs in the bosom of social life. Such a science would be part of social psychology, and therefore of general psychology. We will call it *semiology* (from the Greek *sēmeion*, 'sign')." (Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, *loc. cit.*, p. 43.) Elsewhere he speaks not of "social psychology" but of "collective psychology." (*Ibid.*, p. 103.) Note that Saussure implicitly conceives of social psychology as a science that has as its object "social life" [*la vie sociale*].

He is therefore interested in establishing the semiotics that he founded within the social sciences, with the only limitation that here he is thinking above all of social psychology, that is, he evidently sees society determined, in the first place, by an aspect of those dynamics that Marx designates as "forms [...] ideological", demarcating them from the "economic conditions of production, faithfully verifiable from the point of view of the natural sciences". (Compare Karl Marx, *Contribution to the critique of political economy*. (Prologue), Trans. by Jorge Tula, León Mames, Pedro Scaron, Miguel Murmis and José Aricó. Mexico, Siglo XXI, 1980, p. 5.)

²⁹Comp.: "It can be said, then, that entirely arbitrary signs are those that best realize the ideal of the semiological procedure; That is why language, the most complex and the most widespread of the systems of expression, is also the most characteristic of all; In this sense, linguistics can be set up as the general model of all semiology, even if language is only a particular system." (Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, *loc. cit.*, p. 94.)

capitalist logic. They are only different ways of putting up with the unbearable contradictions of the capitalist form of reproduction on a daily basis.

21. In the present system of reproduction there is a systematic contradiction between the logic of value and that of use value. While use value is what is actually needed to satisfy the needs of human beings, value is the economic category that starts from the amount (i.e., time) of human labor that was used on average for the production of a certain good. In the currently dominant system of reproduction, the logic of value tends to destroy more and more that of use value. That is, everything is done to increase the production of values and with this surplus value and profits, but at the same time the goods that really improve the lives of human beings are tendentially destroyed (see, for example, ecological problems).

22. The existence of the contradiction between the logic of value and that of use value can be recognized or denied. In addition, more importance can be given to value or use value. The four possible combinations that result from these two distinctions are the conceptual basis of the four ethos.

23. The realist ethos denies the contradiction between value and use value and at the same time gives more importance to value. The Romantic ethos also denies this contradiction but leans towards use value. The classical ethos recognizes the existence of this contradiction and sticks to the logic of value, while the baroque ethos also recognizes it, but tries to save – in spite of everything – the dynamics of use value.

24. In detail:

The realist ethos, which today is the dominant one worldwide based on its pre-eminence in the countries of the 'centre', simply denies this contradiction and assumes that with the growing fixation on the production of values, use values are automatically also rescued and improved. This negation is not only theoretical and thought-out, but is expressed in a participatory, committed attitude in favor of the prevailing social relations. Echeverría formulates with respect to this ethos that it is an "attitude of affirmative and militant identification, with the pretension of creativity that the accumulation of capital has; with the pretension of the latter not only to faithfully represent the interests of the 'social-natural' process of reproduction - interests that in truth it represses and deforms - but to be at the service of its quantitative and qualitative potentiation".³⁰

³⁰ Bolívar Echeverría, "El Ethos Barroco", *loc. cit.*, pp. 19 ff.

The romantic ethos is for Echeverría a "second way of naturalizing the capitalist, just as militant as the previous one, but completely opposed to it, it also implies the confusion of the two terms, but not within an affirmation of value but precisely of use value. In it, 'valorization' appears fully reducible to the 'natural form'".³¹ In this ethos the tendency towards the destruction of use-values is also denied, but not with a fixation on exchange values as in the realist ethos, but with the false idea that the present economic reproduction is organized according to the real needs of human beings, that is, according to the logic of use-values.

The classical ethos differs from the first two in that it does not deny the contradiction between the logic of the production of (exchange) values and use values, but it implies a generalized resignation to what exists, that is, the "tragic fulfillment of the course of things."³² This ethos is accompanied by the "detachment and equanimity of a Stoic rationalism",³³ any "attitude for or against the established that is a militant attitude in its enthusiasm or its lament" appears here as "illusory and superfluous".³⁴

The baroque ethos, which in Latin America generally coexists with the dominant realist ethos, consists of a paradoxical combination of a sensible modesty and a disobedient impulse. There is in it the absurd attempt - from the perspective of the other three ethe - to rescue use-value *by means of* its own destruction. In this way of enduring and perceiving the capitalist form of reproduction, the tireless attempt to leap over the existing barriers to human happiness *persists after* having clearly distinguished them as insurmountable under current conditions. This ethos shares with the classical ethos the ability to perceive without hesitation the capitalist tendency towards the destruction of use values and thus of human happiness; With the romantic ethos, on the other hand, he shares the deep conviction that the values of use *within* the reigning society can be saved. For Bolívar Echeverría, the baroque ethos is "a strategy that accepts the laws of mercantile circulation (...), but does so at the same time that it is dissatisfied with them and subjects them to a game of transgressions that refunctionalizes them."³⁵ There is here the aforementioned "conflictive combination of conservatism and nonconformity".³⁶ It is conservative, because it does not openly rebel against the capitalist system and because it

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³² *Idem.*

³³ Bolívar Echeverría, "Modernity and Capitalism", *loc. cit.*, p. 165.

³⁴ *Idem.*

³⁵ Bolívar Echeverría, "El Ethos Barroco", *loc. cit.*, pp. 26 ff.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

opposes the complete destruction of possibilities of enjoyment that previously existed in part because they are part of a traditional way of life. It is non-conformist because it does not submit completely to the logic of capital, that is, to the logic of sacrificing the quality of life of the majority of human beings for the sake of the profits obtained by the owners of the means of production.

25. The realistic ethos is the ethos of clarity. For him there are no insurmountable contradictions in the existing social system, and the mastery of use-value is for him the most desirable. He is convinced that the logic of value also guarantees the development of use value.

26. The baroque ethos is the ethos of contradiction. He knows of the insurmountable contradiction within the social formation between the logic of value and that of use value. He knows, moreover, that use-value is tendentially destroyed by the blind logic of the unlimited production of values and with it surplus value and profits. But in spite of this, or even on the basis of this contradiction, by using it, he tries to rescue the right of use value and with it the possibility of human enjoyment. Knowing that the capitalist system makes human happiness impossible, he tries to achieve it, even if only for a few moments. He lives the unlivable not from the denial that he is unlivable but precisely from its recognition. Playing with the impossibility of *jouissance*, he tries to realize it in hidden and spontaneous spaces.

27. While the clarity of the realist ethos, which is based on the false denial of a basic aspect of our present existence, does not truly succeed in realizing the highest ideal of the Enlightenment, the recognition of the other as a *conditio sine qua non* of the constitution of one's own subjectivity, of one's own self, the baroque ethos achieves to a greater extent coexistence with the one who really has different ways of living and thinking. It is precisely his contradictory attitude, which includes speaking in double meanings, the almost non-existence of the word *no*, etc., that makes him capable of tolerating the differences between human beings without demanding that the other make himself equal to himself in order to be able to recognize him as the realist ethos does.

28. The Baroque ethos takes its name from this similarity to Baroque art: the ability to combine and mix elements that from a "serious" point of view could not be together, combined or mixed. This mixture is chaotic and transgresses the established (aesthetic) rules, but at the same time it was the only art that could include indigenous aesthetic elements in New Spain. The elements do not "understand" each other but "let each other

live". They do not recognize themselves in the Hegelian sense, but neither do they annihilate or exclude each other aggressively. They "give each other the plane", they don't really understand each other, they can't even interact with full consciousness, but with this they don't question each other's right to exist. The lack of clarity implied by this, which for Western philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas causes precisely the lack of communication capacity and with this ultimately the lack of liberation capacity, is from Echeverría's perspective rather the ability to communicate despite the structural impossibility of really understanding each other in today's society – due to the omnipresent competition in which the other is always and above all a competitor that must be overcome. In the baroque ethos, it is a matter of communicating with the other not only despite the structural impossibility of understanding each other, but even using it, playing with double meanings. It re-functionalizes misunderstandings precisely as a form of communication. While this attitude, from the perspective of Habermas, Honneth, et. al., would be due to its lack of clarity a poorly developed communication, that is, a communication that would have *to be modernized*, for Bolívar Echeverría it would rather be an expression of *another* type of capitalist modernity that coincides with another form of modern ethos, namely: the baroque ethos.

29. The consequence of this dispute is clear between the United States and Mexico. While in the former country, even after almost five hundred years, the relatives of the previous slaves practically do not mix in their biological and cultural reproduction with the relatives of the previous colonizers, because it is impossible for them to really recognize themselves, in Mexico there is a high degree of cultural miscegenation and at the level of the formation of couples. This miscegenation is not necessarily a recognition of the other in the sense of idealist and Enlightenment philosophy (e.g. Hegel) but it achieves something that is often not achieved with the realist ethos: to live together despite the impossibility of doing so imposed by social formation. While the realist ethos with its clarity and apparent *sincerity* only manages to reproduce the barriers established since colonization based on economic and presumably racial differences, the baroque ethos can play with this. Without really questioning the capitalist system and its deepest historical basis, colonialism, it tries at the same time to live a pleasant life that also includes coexistence and common enjoyment with those around them. It transgresses the unwritten laws of racism if it allows for enjoyment – even if only temporarily and casually – without really questioning them. With this it ultimately has a more open aspect than the realist ethos that simply denies the

existence of these contradictions, including racism. With this, the realist ethos becomes incapable of resolving them and reconstructs them entirely (as can be seen in the formation of couples and the unquestioned predominance of the Anglo-Saxon-Protestant tradition at the levels of the ruling classes).

30. Honneth's theory is inscribed, without his being aware of it, within the framework of the three non-baroque ethes, especially in the realist ethos with a certain influence of the romantic ethos. In this logic, societies that give rise to a set of exceptions are despised, and with this they open up certain spaces for the existence of traditions – despite the totalitarian logic of the capitalist economic system, which by its own logic does not allow any god next to the god 'surplus value'. Only the contradictory and paradoxical condition of the baroque ethos can allow so many spaces for exceptions and traditions.

31. But for the other three ethe, as well as for Honneth's theory of the "struggle for recognition", this would rather be an expression of a society further away from his *ideal* of recognition, since recognition is always inscribed within the framework of a rational relationship and a clear perception of the other. While according to Bolívar Echeverría, the baroque ethos allows *another type* of coexistence that is *not* that of recognition. The baroque form of coexistence is rather to *let each other live*, ignoring each other to a large extent, knowing that real understanding and with it real recognition, is not possible in the conditions given by the society of competition as an omnipresent rule of social organization.

32. The spaces for 'exceptions', for the limited breaking of certain established social rules, also include a space for other cultures, other forms of coexistence and even other forms of physical appearance. The 'other', the 'others' can live in these spaces of exception without having to justify themselves to the majority for being different. They would remain as an exception to the rule, which is not the same as being excluded by definition, since in the baroque ethos the exception is in a certain way the rule. But from a *realistic point of view*, like Honneth's, this is incomprehensible and there would be no choice but to *prescribe* to the whole world to follow the path of the *struggle* for recognition that so often led to the bloodiest failures in European history, which of course includes the history of his actions on *his* colonies, as well as the aforementioned history of its most accomplished former colony from the perspective of the realist ethos, the United States 'of America'.

33. Honneth, in his naïve progressivism, linked to a first-world ethnocentrism, cannot perceive the *different* forms of capitalist modernity, and takes it for granted that the ethos of

recognition, which he analyzes – the realistic ethos with a certain romantic influence – is the only modern ethos, or at least the *most advanced*. It is precisely in this denial of the existence of the other ethe as equally *modern*, which are *by definition* no further from the "finality of human self-realization,"³⁷ that Honneth himself involuntarily repeats and demonstrates what can be analyzed as a result of Echeverría's theory: the inability of the realist and romantic ethe - to whom he belongs in everyday life and to which he theoretically defends - to really recognize the another, in this case, the *other* ethos of capitalist modernity, the baroque ethos.

34. This inability to recognize the baroque ethos as the other ethos of capitalist *modernity* includes not only ignorance or lack of information about it as a social reality, but also the refusal to take into account the theories that have been developed about the baroque ethos in the last thirty years and that have been discussed not only in some of the intellectual and academic centers of Latin America, but also in some of the intellectual and academic centers of Latin America. but also in several universities and publications in Europe. We mention this, not to presumably give more validity to these theories, because they have been discussed in Europe, but to demonstrate the *dogmatic aspect* of the aforementioned refusal to take into account these theoretical discussions, which are easily accessible even to Honneth, Habermas and other defenders of the recognition of the *other*. But his claim to universality ends in the limits established by the new *iron curtains* of the aforementioned *First World*.

IN SUMMARY

Confronting theoretical developments in Latin America, in this case by the philosopher Bolívar Echeverría, with the Critical Theory of Society, as well as some of the German university professors who consider themselves his followers, such as Axel Honneth, is – as we have shown with the 34 theses formulated above – not only an excellent way to make visible the limitations of the latter's interpretation of Critical Theory and the deficiencies of its reconstruction of Hegel's *theory of recognition*. In addition to this, we can see how philosophical contributions are being developed from outside the world's military and economic centers that help, in an exemplary way, to better understand the current capitalist world, its contradictions and its inability to overcome its self-destructive tendency. This inability will continue, if it clings to the "own" contributions of the

³⁷ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, loc. cit., p. 276.

aforementioned centers, underestimating and ignoring everything that historically and currently is being worked on in the discussions and texts, as well as what is being lived and carried out daily in apparently *peripheral societies*. There is no doubt that a possible solution to the radical problems of the current humanity cannot be expected from those countries that in the last five hundred years have dedicated themselves to subjugating and destroying a large part of the planet, but that humanity will only be able to survive, if it begins to listen to the *critical* voices that come from outside the *chorus* of the self-called *First World*.³⁸

³⁸ There is no place here to delve further into the contributions that were given, for example, from Mexico to the modern world. From a political, legal and state theory perspective we have tried it elsewhere: Stefan Gandler, "Benito Juárez, pillar of universal modernity. Mexican Political Liberalism in the International Context. Ten theses." In: *Anthropology. Official Bulletin of the National Institute of Anthropology and History. Nueva época*, Mexico City, National Institute of Anthropology and History, no. 88, January-April 2010, pp. 42-55. On the perspective of the philosophical contributions from Mexico for a modern world, with fewer tendencies towards oppression, exclusion and exploitation, we have tried it in: Stefan Gandler, *Critical Marxism in Mexico*. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Bolívar Echeverría, loc. cit.

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