

Bildung and Critical Theory facing Post-modern Education

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Is the project of Bildung still viable in a post-modern era and under post-modern conditions? Is Critical Theory still relevant in today's post-modern conditions? Are these two questions related in any meaningful/interesting manner? In this article the answer to these questions is affirmative. So another question arises: what lesson does this answer teach us, or what responsibilities does it load onto us with regard to the possibilities which are still open today for counter-education as self-cultivation, reflection, and emancipatory praxis? This article attempts to show that the prospects for today's resistance to the current processes of dehumanization, which flow from normalizing education are closely bound up with the project of Bildung and its re-articulation by the critical thinkers of the Frankfurt School.

The thinkers of the Frankfurt School conceived their project as inseparable from the tradition of Enlightenment and from the mission of Bildung. What made Bildung so attractive for thinkers such as Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse was that Bildung was not to be reduced to mere education in the

sense of cultivation, normalization, or socialization. Walter Bruford translates it as "self-cultivation".^a As such it was related to the expression and elevation of the inwardness of the subject and of his or her autonomy. Humanists such as Thomas Mann saw in this kind of education for the enhancement of the inner Spirit a serious danger to the establishment of a humanistic public sphere in Germany. This is because he found in it a potential resistance to the kinds of accepted codes, standards, and responsibilities that precondition the establishment of any genuine democratic civil society. In this respect Mann treats the Goethe's, Hölderlin's and Nietzsche's teaching as a real threat. Refusing to share Mann's optimism about bourgeois, capitalistic democracy, and in the face of the need to search for resistance to the logic of capitalism and Fascism, the critical thinkers of the 1930s accepted as the most precious what Mann understood as the most dangerous element in the Bildung tradition. But on this point nonetheless, they only followed most of the representatives of Enlightenment even if these figures were still committed to a positive Utopia, which the Critical Theory thinkers could not share.

The emphasis on the autonomy of the inwardness of the subject was central even for von Humboldt at the turn of the 19th century when trying to realize the concept of Bildung within the reform of higher education at the new University of Berlin. Humboldt refers to nothing less than "the unification of learning,

wisdom, and *Arete*.^b As one can see here, for Humboldt, following Kant, and in contrast to Nietzsche, *Bildung* has the goal of a fulfilment of humanity as its aim: full development of the powers of each human individual. In such a *Kultur* the end result will be the development of many, different, highly individuated persons^c who will establish a more humane society. For Herder too *Bildung* represents "a principal orientation of the totality of the human (intellect, will and senses) towards the totality of Being"^d and this orientation is carried and developed by and within the history of humanity.^e The elevation of the independent, creative, autonomous individual here is the heart of the project.

The conception of *Bildung* to which Critical Theory was committed posited an essential characteristic of the human subject. In the concept of *Bildung* its proponents found an uncompromising commitment to free will or human autonomy as a central human characteristic. This was central to the utopian dimension of their critical project even when developing this concept within a pessimistic critical philosophy. The potential autonomy of the subject or at least the potential for a struggle for the realization of her possible autonomy (always partial, relative, temporary, and dangerous) was of vital importance for them. Extremely significant for them was the conception of *Bildung* as an edification of the deepest independent powers of the individual as an engaged and undivided element of the totality of existence, powers enabling her escape from the dominant normalization processes and the manipulations of hegemonic hierarchies. One can even see their entire project as an attempt to further develop and realize the concept of *Bildung* as a politically revolutionary project whilst remaining sensitive to the powers that make realization of the ideal of *Bildung* not only historically impossible but also apparently irrelevant.

The big challenge to the critical impetus at this historic moment is that on the one hand the master signifiers, the strivings, and the horizons of the ideal which made possible a struggle for the edification of humanity have been exiled, while, on the other hand the critical impulse refused to abandon the Utopia of reflection, transcendence, and solidarity as articulated within the tradition of Bildung. The impetus of Bildung, however, springs from deeper sources than the possibilities opened or closed by any governing master signifiers or the possibilities determined by the cultural politics of the historical moment and its economic and technological (sub)structures. What the project of Bildung essentially aims at is not historically determined. It is what Heidegger calls the nearness to Being. In the Critical Theory it is referred to within the framework of “Utopia” or “potentialities”. Both traditions refer to the openness which is immanent to LIFE, to existence, or to Being, in its historical actualization. Counter-education in an era of the exile of Spirit and of historical closure of emancipatory possibilities will refer to this essential openness as a Negative Utopia. Here it will find much relevance in the thought of the thinkers of the Frankfurt school in the second stage of their development, where they articulated utopian pessimism, or negative utopia as the only possible opening for defending the essence of the concept of Bildung, which is still possible for us to relate to, even in the historical moment in which we are presently imprisoned. Central to this attempt is possibility for the human subject to transcend the condition of mere objectivity, to overcome the Same, that which reduces her to identity with all others, to become more than an effect of the conditions of his or her constitution in the Platonic cave in which she is constructed. Even as an impasse, as an imperative of self-constitution or transcendence in impossible conditions, the tradition of Bildung is still relevant. In a certain sense it is exactly amid the impossibility of the realization of the historical aims of Bildung that the essence of Bildung becomes relevant – as the presence of the absence. And within the framework of negative Utopia, counter-education if true to itself does not need more than this presence of the absence, as dwelling in exile, as a meaningful homelessness, as a worthy religiousness in a Godless world.

Seeing the project of Critical Theory as a realization and a further development of the concept of Bildung should highlight the relations between two dimensions in the concept of Bildung and to two stages in the development of Critical theory. One element of the concept of Bildung as self-inner-cultivation is the view that emphasizes the self as a totality, which can constitute and develop its own subjectivity without dependence on, or redemption by anything external to itself. As such it presents life as a form of art. Emancipated subjectivity creates truths, needs, representations, and drives. It also 'creates' the outer world and thus too the Other, or at least bound to enforce itself on the otherness of the Other and on the world which becomes an object of manipulation. It makes the world a projection, a *Bild* of the self or of the instincts of the self, as in the case of Nietzsche,^f and only as such can its self-cultivation be true to itself. Nietzsche might be considered the best representative of this trend, yet it is present even in its opposite trend, not only among other representatives of this trend such as Hölderlin in his idea of "homecoming". This second, opposite, trend sees the *Bild* in the Bildung as reflection of a 'thing in itself'; as something to be perceived by transcendence to God in the mystical tradition or to the Idea in the Platonic tradition. In both versions (which are not sharply distinguishable) the concept of Bildung represents a relation of the subject to an exterior totality which is conceived as the thing in itself or truth. The elevation of the subject towards this totality is a *telos*, or a potential to elevate ourselves towards something of which we have

some image. It is in this context that the *Bild* in the *Bildung* has its sense and can become an educational driving force or potential.

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School existed in two versions which broadly speaking can be traced within two periods. In its first stage of development Critical Theory represented a positive Utopia in which the realization of the concept of *Bildung* takes place within the *social*. In this first period the realization of *Bildung* is politically revolutionary and *Bildung* is conceived in its second sense, relating to an exterior totality. Within the framework of Critical Theory, it is developed as the neo-Marxist realization of the mission of Enlightenment. This positive, optimistic utopianism is basically founded on the concept of *Bildung* as a form of cultivation, which is or might become a genuine human way of life in accordance with the realization of its real *telos*, truth, or potential. We may ask however, whether it represents the self-cultivation of an autonomous subject? Or is it an exterior developmental influence, or even a constitution of a desirable subjectivity, of drives, knowledge, values in the subject by objective forces of reality mediated or unmediated by Critical Theory?

Right from the first stage of its development, Critical Theory differed substantially from orthodox Marxist attempts to become a materialist realization of *Bildung*, which were hindered by Marxism's strict economical

and political reductionism.^g It had, however, much in common with them. In this first phase of development, the Critical Theorists had an explicit Marxist orientation. Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm, Loewenthal, and their colleagues rejected the idealism-oriented tradition of Bildung and denied the legitimacy of any reflection on society or formation of philosophy that is detached from its social context. Their ambitions were principally both scientific and revolutionary.

A clear manifestation of this optimist-positive utopianism is Horkheimer's "Montaigne and the role of skepticism." From within the Marxist tradition Horkheimer here articulates the importance and weaknesses of modern, bourgeois skepticism, which is a central element of Enlightenment and the project of Bildung. Because the bourgeoisie have the upper hand, claims Horkheimer, the worth of the individual becomes mainly an economic issue and the critical Spirit becomes an individual's aesthetic pastime.^h Skepticism, he claims, is targeted at saving the individual. This is its great goal. But Critical Theory, in opposition to this tradition, conceives the individual as basically dependent on social conditions and understands her emancipation as part of the liberation of humanity, coming about within an essential change in the social totality.ⁱ This new society, according to the early Horkheimer, will actualize Montaigne's quest for the happy realization of the essence of the human.^j

Critical Theory, at this stage, explicitly emphasizes the version of *Bildung* which sees the "*Bild*" (or that which the *Bild* signifies) as something external to the subject. Only as such does it make possible her transcendence into a more humane condition of life. This position makes manifest its orthodox Marxist heritage. At the same time, however, Critical Theory at this stage also contained an implicit conception of a human essence. This conception allowed the formulation of Critical Theory as optimism and enabled its optimistic orchestration of possible revolutionary praxis, which would be fertilized and empowered by Critical Theory. It nourished an educational agenda of self-cultivation within the framework of what we call the "positive utopianism" that characterized the first stage of development of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School.

The concept of *Bildung* in Critical Theory in the second stage of its development by Horkheimer and Adorno turns from optimism towards the revolutionary prospects of the social totality, towards pessimistic attitudes, towards the social arena, and even towards the inwardness of the individual and the essence of being. This move was founded on philosophical pessimism, not entirely absent from the first stage of the development of Critical Theory.^k

When further developed, it enabled Critical Theory in its second stage of development, in an 'era of the exile of Spirit', to re-establish the relevance of

the utopian dimension to thought and to the struggle for transcendence from meaninglessness. Horkheimer explicitly introduces the second stage of development of Critical Theory as turning from the quest for revolution to the enhancement of education within the Bildung tradition, albeit in a new manner, which does not distance itself from praxis.¹ The fundamental commitment of Critical Theory to overcome injustice and to challenge the production of hegemonic facts, truths, and values, that is, Critical Theory as counter-education,^m as a concrete political and theoretical project, is not to be disembedded from the context of actual conceptual and material conditions. Horkheimer and Adorno not only understood this, they even conceived the second half of the 20th century as a historical situation in which the struggle over realizing the ideals of the Enlightenment, Bildung, or counter-education in the critical sense, would become impossible since Instrumental Rationality would gain the upper hand over all other existential, intellectual and political options and especially over the tradition of Objective Reason as a consequence of the implementation of the logic of capitalism in all dimensions and at all levels of life. "Every word or sentence that hints of relations other than pragmatic is suspect. When a man is asked to admire a thing, to respect a feeling or attitude, to love a person for his own sake, he smells sentimentality and suspects that someone is pulling his leg or trying to sell him something".ⁿ

This interpretation of historical developments and their implications was the central element of Adorno and Horkheimer's Critical Theory in its second stage of development. They developed their mature Critical Theory within the framework of a pessimistic historical reconstruction on the one hand and philosophical pessimism on the other. Nevertheless there was no change in their sensitivity to the possibility of critical work and political resistance. There was also no change in their commitment to develop the educational implications of Critical Theory as an enlightened alternative to the hegemonic ideology and its Culture Industry. In other words, they did not abandon their commitment to the project of Enlightenment and to Bildung within the changing conditions which made it possible. While in its first stage their work was actually an optimistic rearticulation of the concept of Bildung towards its collective, material, realization in concrete history in its second stage of development their theory manifested the impossibility of realising the project of Bildung and the Enlightenment's ideals and imperatives, and even their apparent historical irrelevance.

All the conditions and the assumptions of the project of Bildung seemed to be fading away, according to their reconstruction. In the second stage of the development of Critical Theory they emphasized the deconstruction of the individual as an autonomous subject much more than the suffering and the

emancipatory potential of the proletariat, which they had underlined in the first stage. According to Horkheimer, the transformation of material conditions for a human reality dwindles too.^o The individual is never with herself but always an instrument of some other agency, supreme, which manipulates her for its own benefit. According to Horkheimer this is actually one of the manifestations of the victory of Enlightenment, not its defeat. On the historical level, however, he shows how in the second half of the 20th century the life of each individual, including her most intimate drives and needs, which in modernity constituted the private sphere, must adjust itself to the imperatives of a total rationalization of the human condition. The individual, with all her potentials, is allowed to reproduce herself only in accordance with the supremacy of the imperatives of the system, which is committed to self-reproduction without a *telos*, a meaning, or a commitment. Within a total rationalization, a subsumption of the human condition under Instrumental Rationality (which according to Marcuse actually became an irrational rationality^p) the human subject can actually no longer escape the imperatives and the manipulations of the system.^q

This conception of the individual is not elaborated solely on the level of a historical reconstruction. It is also defined within a philosophical pessimism which was based on a turn from Marx to Schopenhauer^f and also a turn from the question of revolution to the possibilities of counter-education.

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer argue that by the mid-twentieth century the rationalization of nature had already culminated in a revolt of nature. Yet the revolt of nature is itself actualized only within the human domain and as a human activity and itself becomes rationalized. The rationalization of the irrational revolt of nature is present in the idea of mere life as the ultimate aim of life. This conception of the *telos* of life as mere self-preservation and self-continuation stands in opposition to the conception inherent in *Bildung* of dialogical self-elevation as the aim of life. Self-preservation or the perverted realization of what Marcuse called "the pleasure principle" disconnects the human from transcendental aims and commitments. It results in a dialectical turn of the principle of oppression: it is humanity itself which becomes a tool of the very nature which it is committed to oppress and exploit in the most efficient manner; oppression is internalized.

In the second stage of the development of Critical Theory Horkheimer and Adorno came to the conclusion that throughout history humanity could only choose between its subordination to nature and the submission of nature to the "I".^s Following Schopenhauer, Horkheimer claims that on the one hand the human is defined as having consciousness in light of her intellect, but on the other hand the intellect cannot but create a rupture between nature and the human being who tries to exploit it. Yet there is here still a germ of the

Enlightenment concept of the human subject that made the ideal of Bildung possible, except that it is articulated pessimistically in a negative manner. The claim is that in this process of constructing the gap between the human self and nature, and between the social self and the natural within the human, the human distances herself not only from nature but at the same time also from her own essence.^t The process of reification of everything, within the framework of the imperative of controlling and enhancing “productivity” and “efficiency”, reifies human beings as well: the instrumentalization of relations between humans and nature, the disappearance of that which is wordless, of mystery, of “the gods”, does not facilitate negation. Estrangement from ‘the obvious’, from ‘the given’ becomes impossible and there is no room for transcendence, or for the struggle to transcend the thingness, the continuum of the Same. In such a world there is no space for the presence of the absence, for Bildung as elevation above given facts and actualities.

On the historical level, the conditions, which apparently made the realization of Bildung impossible also produced fragmentation of the consciousness of alienation whilst confronting a total rationalization of the human condition. For instance, cyberspace confronts us as a one dimensional totality, whilst within the framework of capitalist globalization it becomes “irrational” to resist raising interest rates even when it inflicts starvation on millions of people in Africa and

elsewhere. This is a world where it becomes “irrational” to reduce fatal traffic accidents if it adversely affects speedy transportation and its “efficiency”. On the conceptual level it is manifested in the dissolution of humanist ideas or their transformation within the logic of capitalistic production in parallel with the disappearance of the proletariat as a revolutionary class with progressive aspirations and along with the reification and irrelevance of the Critical Theory itself. As we have seen, for the concept of Bildung a critical distance from the given ‘facts’, on the one hand, and from the transcendent totality or from the absolute, on the other, was of vital importance. It made possible the quest for self-cultivation of the individual. It also made possible Bildung as conscious self-constitution of a revolutionary class. But, if, historically, the given facts constitute a one-dimensional totality such as the internet or a “global-flexible-market” where no antagonistic elements are present or no challenge to the self-evident within the given system is possible how then, on what ground, would reflection, self rearticulation, self-cultivation, and transcendence be realized? In the absence of alienation the normalization and standardization of humans face no challenge. Inwardness is of course an important source for the promise of Bildung, along with, or sometimes as an alternative to, a future, utopian external (transcendent or social) totality, which is referred to and fought for. But what if the inwardness of the individual is currently also being swallowed

into the system and its manipulations? What can Critical Theory as the promise of Bildung offer us today? The point is that not only have the conditions for self-cultivation, reflection, and transcendence been demolished: the very quest for transcendence itself is being, together with the exile of Spirit, and the ideals of the autonomous subject and meaningful life are coming to be seen as irrelevances.

The concealment of the quest for transcendence is only one dimension of the end of Utopia^u or of the deconstruction of the Messianic moment,^v which was vital for Critical Theory in both its stages as a rearticulation and further development of the ideal of Bildung. It was accompanied by the diminishing and disappearance of the quest for "the totally other"^w and the "not yet" as opposed to the 'facts' of the present totalising order of things. But these were vital for the possibility of reflection within the framework of Critical Theory.

Reflection here is not to be detached from a religious commitment to the hope "that injustice, which is typical of the world, will not have the last say... a yearning that in the end the hand of the killer will not remain on the innocent victim".^x Within this framework reflection is more than a cognitive potential or a political need: it becomes a moral imperative. It becomes a precondition for and in a certain sense already the first manifestation of resistance to thingness, to the continuum, to meaninglessness, to the hegemonic order of things.

Transcendence here is determined by its possibilities of overcoming normalization and hegemonic ideology, and by its challenging the facts, the inner logic, the consensus and the agreed or sought for aims of the present order. In the absence of antagonistic social alternatives and ideological challenges, the possibilities for the critical spirit become more problematic than ever.

Throughout history, human beings have usually been constructed by apparatuses and powers efficient enough to hide their violence. Transcendence from a false normality, "worthy life", or meaninglessness as a form of closure was conceived possible: either through gathering the forces of antagonistic elements within the system or as a blessed release brought about by a transcendental power. This transcendental dimension was conceived in the form of an alternative order either bursting in from "outside" or springing from "inwardness" and its authentic potentials for rearticulation, self-creation, and elevation toward external truth or worth, manifesting the possibility and the imperative of "the totally other". In the second half of the 20th century, however, when the psyche and its abyss became totally fabricated and controlled, following the path of the appearance of "the totally other" in religious sentiment which became "spirituality", it became more problematic than ever to retain this utopian axis, according to the Frankfurt School thinkers. Not only did

this historical shift affect the possibilities for reflection; the very possibility of a quest for transcendence or self-cultivation became inconceivable.

They formulated the historical implications in terms of a shift, which left no room for the exercise of philosophical eros, dialogical praxis, or critical attitudes to the present order. The individual subject and the totality of the system became identical and by that prevented Bildung or critical reflection, since reflection as transcendence is impossible in the absence of an autonomous subject who realizes her otherness, in the absence of alienation and in face of the demolition of transcending master signifiers. This process of integration replaced the attempt promised by the idea of Bildung to transcend the closure sustained by myth and achieve a disenchantment with the given "facts" and humanizing the world in advancing the cause of reason, *Arete*, and justice. This was in contrast to the promise of Enlightenment and the drive of Bildung to enable the individual to develop and realize the autonomy of the subject, to enable men and women to become different from what they had been manipulated to become, from how they had been constructed. This project was supposed to be realized within the Bildung project as a progressive life pursued in the light of a transcendent, "exterior" alternative totality or in the light of the totality of inwardness as two possible points of departure for transcendence and

self-cultivation. But the optimistic, positive utopianism within which this concept of Bildung was formed has failed. Today it looks irredeemable.

Pre-empting this positive Utopia, a world of myth returned and reality did not become more humane within a progressive moral realization of reason. Society did indeed become a totalized and rationalized space, and it became an arena in which the human subject became dehumanized, standardized, and almost completely swallowed by the system. She became some-thing and not some-one. Horkheimer and Adorno presented the role it was still possible for the philosopher to play in these conditions when they characterized him as a speechless witness to the delivery of a message.^y As such, and to the degree that he takes himself seriously as a deliverer, his stance is that of a neurotic who refuses to be cured, insisting on curing healthy, normal, sane, people instead. Today's philosopher, they argued, is a lonely witness to a mission, which has become irrelevant or ridiculous. He needs superhuman powers to support his refusal to be "cured" and leveled alongside all the other, normal people.^z

These conclusions could have led to a collapse of Critical Theory's mission as a non-idealistic realization of the concept of Bildung, and could have given birth to a one-dimensional pessimism, pragmatism, or other forms of abandonment of the utopian tradition and the mission of Enlightenment and Bildung. The Frankfurt School thinkers, however, in the second stage of the

development of Critical Theory, refused collapse. They refused to give up the emancipatory commitment of the Enlightenment and the mission of Bildung. Nonetheless, its relevance could not have been sustained without a dramatic transformation in its conceptual preconditions, meanings, and aims. Their main challenge was not the historical developments such as the disappearance of the proletariat or the reification of human relations. Nor was the disappearance of the conceptual possibilities for a critical theory and revolutionary praxis devastating for them since Critical Theory as the effort for the realization of Bildung needed possibilities for struggle rather than chances for victory. Its immanent negativism could not abandon negativism itself, however, conscious alienation. And thus, the exile of the utopian eros and the forgetting of the imperative of becoming a person and transcending the process of reification as normalization became the most important challenge for their project. What enabled them to hold on to the imperative of the essence of the concept of Bildung? Their Utopianism freed them from the dictates of 'given facts' and 'actual possibilities'. The negativity of their Utopianism enabled them to struggle on negating the realities as exiles, from within the Diaspora. It demanded, however, the ideal of Bildung to become a central element in something we should call religiousness, held by the devotion of self-proclaimed elect. Bildung became more than ever elitist within a utopian pessimism shared

by the few, impossible to defend within the framework of the governing rationality.

Late Horkheimer and Adorno formulated their alternative within the new social and conceptual conditions as a pessimist utopianism. Here pessimism became an impetus for Utopia and for the mission of defending Critical Theory and preserving the goal of Bildung. Gone is the optimism which characterized previous versions of Bildung towards the human subject, the "light" of truths and worthy values, the relations between question and answer, culture and nature, language and the world, signifier and signified. It was alienation and suffering, not as passive pain but as a worthy stance towards the world and towards the very possibility of an evaluative relation and openness to the question of meaning and life as more than mere self-preservation, power, or pleasure which became the most important things. The lack of suffering (as distinct from the plenitude of mere pain) or the possibility of worthy suffering became a central issue for the preservation of the quest for transcendence or dialogical self-cultivation within the tradition of the Bildung project.

The pessimism of Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno presents the modern world as "Hell upon earth",^{aa} in which ultimately violence and meaninglessness are the rulers and there is no room for worthy suffering. The Enlightenment was committed to supreme ideals and the realization of the project of Bildung. It

was committed to a concept of transcendence in which self-constitution presupposes Objective Reason. From the viewpoint of postmodernism it appears that it presumed or was committed to the belief in the possibility of worthy suffering as edification of the self within a serious struggle to overcome the tyranny of the aimless violence which creates our meanings, representations, and subjects. In other words, via the project of Bildung the Enlightenment presumed the possibility of overcoming dogmatism, nihilism, and relativism and the reduction of experience to mere pain/pleasure. The project of Bildung presupposed the possibility of transformation of pain/pleasure into worthy suffering/happiness. This was conditional, however, on the possibility of justifying transcendence, resisting normalization, refusing the governing rationality and its promises which would swallow us in meaninglessness. Such a justification, or the attunement to the call of “the totally other” for us to transcend the ‘given’ in our lives was anchored in the promise/imperative addressed to us by that “totally other” or by our own devotion to the “otherness of the other”. The Frankfurt School thinkers had to preserve a non-historical dimension in their thinking for their critique of the historical moment.

In other words, Horkheimer, like Adorno, Marcuse, and Benjamin, refused to abandon Utopia. While understanding the dialectic of Enlightenment and the tension between freedom and justice, and pleasure and competence, nonetheless

when it came to the serious evaluation and affirmation of life they committed themselves to overcome Enlightenment. This, however, was to be from within, as devoted humanists. At the same time they understood that current historical circumstances prevented any serious collective attempt at actualizing philosophical life as a dialogue and that traditional attempts to fulfil the mission of Bildung were irrelevant. There was currently no room even for any evaluative judgement, Horkheimer concluded.^{bb}

Historically, according to Horkheimer, current Western society had become "Babylon" in which everything was reified, becoming a "thing"^{cc} that ultimately had only market value. In this wholly "administered world" a rationalized system manipulates all dimensions of life^{dd} and there is no longer room for any authentic human experience.^{ee} Under these circumstances a new human being is being constituted, who is part and parcel of the omnipresent thingness, part of a totality, which swallows every potentially 'other', different, antagonistic, potentially emancipatory, element. The main characteristic of such a human existence is the absence or the irrelevance of any drive or imperative for self-cultivation and autonomy or for criticizing, challenging, and changing reality. In the absence of Spirit or even the diminishing erotic quest for overcoming thingness, closure, and meaninglessness, even the greatest technological advances cannot secure an essential difference between this new human being

and other animals, the subject and the world of objects. Here Adorno agrees with Horkheimer and only adds that actually humans are in a worse condition than the animals in the sense that they represent not nature but perverted nature.

The abandonment of the ideal of the self-cultivated individual or the project of Bildung and the forgetfulness of humans' forgetfulness that life can be a dangerous mission of transcending thingness, meaninglessness, and mere life, are central to Horkheimer's pessimism. However, neither historical pessimism nor Horkheimer's own philosophical pessimism abandon the utopian axis, which is vital to any struggle over the transcendence of factuality and elevation from mere factuality. Traditionally, within religion and idealism, transcendence was directed towards God, towards the absolute, or towards worthy suffering. Horkheimer, explicitly says that in his Critical Theory the absolute has been replaced by hope for "the totally other" than the present reality.^{ff} This utopian element is here an impetus for hope, which is a precondition for the quest and for any struggle over possibilities for reflection that challenges the self-evidence of given facts and the commitment to the transcendence of oneself or humanity from this factuality.

Hope is central to the possibility of avoiding abandonment of the Bildung project and the ideals of Enlightenment. For Adorno too hope is central, even if not in the positive-optimistic framework: "[Negative Dialectic] is a critique of

the fact that critique itself, in opposition to its own trend, must remain within the borders of conceptualizations... From the definition of negative dialectics itself it follows necessarily that it does not satisfy itself as if it was absolute. This is the form of her hope".^{gg} This is a kind of pessimism which does not permit any total closure, not even that of pessimism and as such reformulates utopianism, even if a new, negative, utopianism.

For the Critical Theory of Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer, pessimism becomes a constitutive element of a utopianism which is liberated from a naive belief^{hh} and from optimism. In this Horkheimer brings utopianism to a new stage of development, in which pessimism becomes a central element of the utopian thought. Within this pessimist utopianism true solidarity is constituted by the acknowledgement of the inevitability, universality, and omnipenetrative power of suffering, the omnipotence of meaninglessness, and the intrusive potential of contingent power relations that create realities and produce truths, values, identities, yardsticks, drives, and subjects. The acknowledgement of suffering as universal, as encompassing all creatures, makes possible solidarityⁱⁱ and calls for us to take responsibility to acknowledge its worth and to act to achieve a worthier suffering that does not negate happiness. As such it constitutes the central element of a possible dialogue.

Horkheimer's position has some similarities with that of present postmodernists in his understanding that belief in a better, positive, alternative is a dangerous, naive optimism, which enables one to avoid taking a real critical stance. However, he differs substantially from them in the sense that his anti-fundamentalism and anti-positivism lead him neither to relativism nor to pragmatism. For late Critical Theorists truth, justice, beauty, love, worthy suffering, reflection, transcendence, and dialogical self-cultivation remained central despite their [i.e. the theorists'] resistance to any form of positive utopianism and their rejection of any optimistic philosophical, political, or educational alternative. As in the tradition of *Bildung*, the ideals of Enlightenment remained central to late Critical Theory, but only in their negativity. Justice, for example, remained central, and the demand for justice was an uncompromising element in its proponents' theory of truth. However, justice was to be present in this world only in the form of resisting injustice.

Historically, however, according to Horkheimer, there are some islands in society where the triumph of Instrumental Rationality and the logic of capitalism did not completely destroy all emancipatory potentials of the Enlightenment. The universities and the process of higher education, he thought, still contained some critical, emancipatory, potentials for struggling for *Bildung* in a more social, political, explicit, manner. Sometimes he is almost

uncritical and manifests a problematic optimistic attitude, when he speaks about the possibilities still open for Bildung in the universities.^{jj}

According to Horkheimer, while understanding that there is no longer room for Utopia^{kk} it is still possible to educate in the universities in light of the Enlightenment for "articulating the negation".^{ll} If only the university be faithful to its academic mission, it may still educate individuals, in the face of a spiritless world, to revolt, to become "people who will be able to revolt even against their own group in which they were raised".^{mmm} In this sense, according to Horkheimer, Bildung is today to be realized, reintroducing learning as a mission, not as a tool.ⁿⁿ

More than a generation after the second stage of Critical Theory and its pessimist utopianism tried to save the emancipatory ideals of Enlightenment and the possibility of Bildung in the face of the multi-dimensional success of Instrumental Rationality, advanced technology, and expanding capitalism, we must now ask again: is it still possible to defend the ideal of Bildung? What is the philosophical, political, existential, and educational cost of defending Bildung today? What is the current stance of the attempt of Critical Theory to preserve Bildung and fight a utopian fight, in face of current postmodern conditions?

At first glance the project of Bildung and the various "postmodern" theories and approaches to texts, concepts, and realities seem to be *bona fide* oppositions. This is because Bildung is a developmental educational process, and postmodernism rejects linear processes. Bildung presupposes progress, both personal and social, while postmodernism opposes any belief in progress and tries to display the power relations that progress rests upon and the oppression of certain possibilities and of its Other which it involves. Bildung presupposes the autonomy of the subject while postmodernism rejects this belief and deconstructs its accompanying "Western, colonialist, elitist and chauvinist pre-assumptions". Bildung presupposes true, valid, or authentic knowledge and values, and posits self-knowledge, inner knowledge, as worthier than other kinds of knowledge and values. Valid knowledge and authentic values are fundamentally humanist in orientation, while postmodernism cannot accept this notion, which is deemed naive, oppressive, and ethnocentric. Bildung has hope and is committed to worthy forms of suffering while postmodernism acknowledges only pain/pleasure and has no hope for worthy suffering, happiness, love, or dialogical transcendence. We may continue this comparison on this level and ask: how far is Critical Theory's version of the project of Bildung from current postmodernist critical theories and sensitivities?

But articulating the question this way is too simplistic, in respect of both postmodernism and the Bildung project. Even before entering into any deep elaboration of postmodern critical theories I hope it is clear from my present reconstruction of the second stage of development of Critical Theory that from this perspective the claim of any simple opposition between postmodernism and Bildung is untenable and misleading.

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School actually precedes current postmodern discourse in its critique of the concept of progress, its critique of epistemological positivism, and its reconstruction of the powers that construct and control subjectification and manipulate intersubjectivity. In its second stage of development this Critical Theory also anticipates current postmodern critiques of the Enlightenment and the cultural imperialism of Western tradition, as well as its reconstruction of the oppressive dimensions of the Culture Industry on the one hand, and the globalizing capitalism it serves and represents on the other. Nonetheless, Critical Theory did not totally abandon the tradition of Enlightenment or any commitment to realizing Bildung.

Critical Theory through its pessimist utopianism preserves its utopian axis and its commitment to transcendence from the realm of self-evidence and the present order. Within this version of negative utopianism, transcendence is realized by reflection, by activating critique as a moral-philosophical-

existential-political alternative rather than "critical thinking" or "deconstruction". It becomes an active, politicized struggle over the possibility of a dialogue within which mere pain or pleasure is transformed into worthy suffering and reflection becomes possible after critical distance from a reified world was established. Critical reflection is a moral commitment, not a solely a realized/unrealized cognitive potential. It is also an existential stance towards the world, and by the same token a concrete way of life. It permits a quest for edification and a quest for self-cultivation, even if always only as an individual and always in temporary, limited dangerous arenas, and without shielding one from suffering which becomes worthy as part of the problematization of happiness, love, dialogical coexistence and meaninglessness. Sometimes it can also be relevant to the emancipation or empowerment of oppressed collectives. Yet by its nature it is anti-collectivist, anti-dogmatic, and anti-ethnocentric, and refuses any form of return to 'the life of the herd', or to the closure and pleasure which are promised by all commitments to negate the otherness of the Other and her suffering.

Whilst being a concrete educational ideal, which can be struggled for and realized for better or worse as "critical pedagogy", critical reflection is also much more and much less than that. It culminates in an imperative and a set of conceptual possibilities and political practices for overcoming Critical

Pedagogy itself no less than any other educational "solutions." It is never an efficient tranquilizer which offers existential, philosophical or political "solutions", "achievements" or "pleasure". It cannot and does not want to lead "back home" to a safe herd-like life as promised by ethnocentrism, the dogmatic quest for truth, or the cyberspace as a perfect pleasure-machine. As counter-education, or as a non-repressive Critical Pedagogy, Bildung is far from irrelevant for today.

It is precisely within the most sophisticated oppressive practices of normalizing education that counter-education today counterposes the ideal and the imperative of self-cultivation, of overcoming that which is currently self-evident. In the absence of any visible ideological alternatives and within the postmodern arena, where the invisibility of educational violence is more secure than ever, as in the case of the educational use of the internet, counter-education faces challenges of unknown magnitude. A current reformulated Critical Theory is of much relevance for challenging easy-going, optimistic attempts at resisting current hegemonic forms of educational violence which are most efficient outside the schooling system, within the wider and more complex networks of the Culture Industry.

As counter-education, today's Bildung can contribute tremendously to the reconstruction of current processes of subjectification and to critical

reconstruction of, and resistance to its production of dehumanization. As such it might also become a challenge to the process of systematic, totally rationalized dispossession of humanity's reflective enquiries, quests and potentials. It does not agree, however, with the postmodern conclusion that the subject is a mere construct of the manipulations and violences which created and forced her to become what she currently is.

Within counter-education the subject, regardless of the efficiency with which she is manipulated by the apparatuses of normalizing education, is conceived and cultivated as having the potential to become something different from anything she is directed to become. Nothing can guarantee the realization of this potential, because it involves a utopian, religious, stance. Nonetheless, a worthy suffering can become a source of hope for the struggle over self-cultivation and transcendence. This is possible because the human being is a special manifestation of Being, of its unending openness and its potential for transcending itself.⁰⁰ The human being, as such, is never to be reduced to a mere thing, a mere manifestation of thingness within Being. This is why meaninglessness and the world of constructed "truths", "values", and horizons is only the starting point for Bildung today.

A rearticulated Critical Theory can become today's Bildung. It will have to challenge not only the hegemonic order but also the various conflicting

educational alternatives to this order, which are covertly a vital part of this order. On this front it has to challenge the quest for a positive Utopia and for educational alternatives. In this sense today's Bildung also reintroduces the centrality of worthy suffering and the need to relinquish the desire for 'the upper hand', the quest for power to enforce the "real", "worthy", "revolutionary alternative" as too often suggested by Critical Pedagogy, by Multicultural Education, Feminist Critical Education, cybertimist educational theorists, and other positive alternatives to hegemonic Western modernistic-oriented education.

Today's counter-education should combine notions drawn from Benjamin's Messianism, Adorno's Negative Dialectics, Horkheimer's Negative Theology, and postmodern sensitivities. As such it would commit itself to negative utopianism and to self-cultivation within a dialogical relation with others and their suffering as individuals, always as individuals and never as collectives. Within this framework today's Bildung would relate to both Western and local traditions. The actual conditions of today would be the starting point; yet for counter-education, while accepting and developing potentially emancipatory elements of the actuality its own importance will be as a starting point for critically re-constructing and overcoming the governing facts of that actuality within which it is positioned.

In today's Bildung the otherness of the Other and the intimacy of her suffering could become a source of hope, a potential and a promise for a dialogical way of life which refuses the Same and coalescence with the other,^{pp} collusion with ultimate consensus, 'final' truths, and pleasure. It could address the worth of the Other and the injustice it suffers. It might also challenge the the uncertainties in the transformation of main pain/pleasure into worthy suffering and love. It might also face its realization as a dangerous creative spirit.

In today's postmodern arenas (which are never "purely" postmodern) the Culture Industry has become even more effective than in the time of Horkheimer and Adorno. The McDonaldization of the globe progresses while contingency, fluidity and hybridity are almost omnipresent - and are currently met by no serious humanist resistance. The little optimism Horkheimer still had regarding higher education at the universities, for example, is today totally untenable. Within postmodern arenas and carried along by the impetus of developments such as cyberspace or virtual reality interactions, the humanist, the philosopher, and the counter-educationalist have to ask themselves: why not join the party? Why resist entering the postmodern condition as an infinite, totalising, omnipotent, pleasure machine?

As some thinkers such as Donna Haraway promise us,^{qq} not only to overcome the trauma of the Fall from the Garden of Eden. Haraway offers a

much more attractive alternative to a human's return to her "homeland" or to the traditional quest for unification with God.^{rr} The human as cyborg enters a new, unknown totality which is the best of all worlds, not just of all possible worlds, so why refuse to welcome and join the newly born totality? Why refuse to enjoy its pleasures if you are among the elect who can do so, in contrast to the billions in Asia, in Africa, in South America, or in the shanty towns within affluent Western societies who will never have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the pleasure machine? Within a postmodern arena why insist on reflection, transcendence, dialogue, and love? Why commit ourselves to (negative) utopian happiness and refuse to enter the given, actual pleasure machine in which there is no longer room for the chiming of philosophical eros as either an existential or as a political issue?

The answer to this challenge is not deliberative, it is not rational; it is rather to adopt the posture of the ethical relationship^{ss} or of the ethical I which precedes any rational elaboration. This is the starting point for today's Bildung: the acknowledgement that it takes a tiger's leap to come to the decision to struggle for worthy suffering, happiness, and love. This leap is also an existential act, which manifests its self-positioning by a self-negating act of free will in a world where possibilities, limitations, and yardsticks for evaluation and judgements are already predetermined for the "I". Within the totalising

closure of the post-modern condition and abyss of forgetfulness which opens up in an optimistic commitment to LIFE and to meaninglessness/pleasure, in face of our forgetfulness of the unbridgable gap between the responsibility for eliminating unnecessary pain and striving toward worthy suffering in a post-modern condition, there is no room for optimism, for a revolutionary collective emancipatory praxis. But this is exactly the condition of a prayer from the exiled in Diaspora.

Counter-education as the realization of the essence of Bildung becomes a prayer: a prayer that its own realization is not at all its aim – but rather that the possibility of prayer itself is its mission. This is how it realizes its responsibility to adjust, to circumstances, but not to become normalized, to insist on transcendence from thingness, from the Same. And as long as it can redeem the abyss of Diaspora it can defend its utopian responsibility and its commitment to the otherness of the Other. This is how it defends its responsibility for the otherness of the Other and for the otherness of itself.

In such conditions, resistance to entering the pleasure machine represents an antagonistic will, a decision to resist meaninglessness, to refuse to accept the dissolution of alienation from the given facts and truths, an affirmation of the struggle over meaning and worth within the horizons of those given power relations that produce and reproduce the given realm of self-evidence. Here it is

impossible to separate a decision to manifest life as a (worthy) struggle from a decision to resist the omnipotence of a violent production of meaninglessness.

It is important to note that such a stance towards life cannot redeem any "real meaning" or "truth" alternative to those that govern us, which remain contextual, historical, fabrications of productive, conflicting, violences. The struggle over the realization of Bildung cannot deliver a positive Utopia of real truth, real meanings, worthy values, and ahistorical, acontextual yardsticks or quests for emancipation, truth, or "light". Yet this does not make it relativistic or captured by mere contingency.

The negative Utopia which follows from Critical Theory might offer resistance, refusal, critique, and a solidarity which makes a philosophical, existential, and political difference. The difference here is not to be gauged by any transcendently valid yardstick or by any positive, absolute truth substituted for the hegemonic one. It offers, however, possibilities of breaking or enclosing the continuum of the realm of self-evidence, of the Same, of the thingness that rules in a postmodern arena while everything is reified, commercialized and standardized in accordance with the imperatives of globalizing capitalism. It is the very possibility of cracking open or, effectively, 'enclosing the closure' of the Same and challenging the continuum and the self-evidence that makes possible (but does not guarantee) the preconditions for

reflection. Today's Bildung represents the erotic impetus of critique in actuality. These preconditions, however, not only cannot guarantee efficiency, they cannot even ensure the appearance of the critical eros; even the hope for it is uncontrollable. Today's Bildung as counter-education can, however, offer to the erotic subject concrete conceptual apparatuses which allow the awakening human subject to struggle to become some-one as concrete praxis, not only as an abstract gesture. It cannot, however, secure this awakening, and most fundamentally, it cannot supply new, vital master-symbols, which will open new historic possibilities for emancipatory education or speak with the voice of the absolute and become a transcendent call to humanity. It cannot overcome meaninglessness but it can offer a new readiness and vitalized responsibility for negating the given facts and pleasures. It is relevant in the counter-educator's refusal to abandon her own spiritual homelessness with and for the Other. This is the form of love which is still possible for counter-education. Yes, love, yes, offering the Other your hand in a Godless world is still an open possibility.

As an attempt at the realization of Bildung in a postmodern reality, counter-education can offer specific strategies of critical reconstruction of the apparatuses and violence that create the subject as an object for manipulation, that produce the "I" as a center for reflectivity (as different from reflection),^{tt} as a focal point for reified "free will". As such, counter-education as the

realization of the inner imperative of the Bildung project is still possible. Its mature stage is manifested under the postmodern condition, yet it is never relevant to collectives, always to individuals as a temporary, unstable, dangerous potential. One of the greatest dangers for it, however, is its possible critical "success"; which will not be possible without paying the price of its transformation into its opposite, becoming another version of normalizing education, trading pain for suffering and pleasure for happiness.

^a Juergen Oelkers, "The origin of the concept of "Allgemeinbildung" in the 18th century Germany", *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 18 (1999), p. 26.

^b *Ibid.*, p. 28.

^c Raymond Geuss, "Kultur, Bildung, Geist", *History and Theory* 35 (2), (1996), p. 158.

^d Max Horkheimer, "Der Bildungsauftrag der Gewerkschaften", *Gesammelte Schriften VIII.*, Frankfurt a.Main 1985, p. 209.

^e Johan Gotfried Herder, *Auch Eine Philosophie der Gischichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, Frankfurt a.Main 1967, p. 145.

^f Friedrich Nietzsche, "An attempt at self-criticism", *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, translated by Clifton Fadiman, New York 1954, p. 942.

^g Hermann Ley, "Bildung und Ideologie", *Deutsche Zeitschrift fuer Philosophie*, 21 (1973), pp. 1178-1194.

^h *Ibid.*, p. 267.

ⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 268-269.

^j *Ibid.*, p. 294.

^k Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, "Walter Benjamin and Marx Horkheimer: from utopia to redemption", *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 8 (1998), pp. 119-155.

^l Max Horkheimer, "Neues Denken ueber Revolution", *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII., Frankfurt a.Main 1985, p. 417.

^m Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, "Towards a non-repressive critical pedagogy", *Educational Theory*, 48: 4 (Fall 1998), p. 486.

ⁿ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, New York 1974, p. 101.

^o Max Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, New York 1978, p. 142.

^p Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, Tel Aviv 1971 (in Hebrew), p. 130.

^q Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, New York 1974, pp. 95-96.

^r Max Horkheimer, "Kritische Theorie gestern und heute", *Gesammelte Schriften* VIII., Frankfurt a.Main 1985, p. 339.

^s Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming, New York 1973, p. 53

^t Max Horkheimer, "Die Aktualitaet Schopenhauers", *Gesammelte Schriften*, VII., Frankfurt a.Main 1985, p. 131.

^u Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, *Philosophy, Politics and Education in Israel*, Tel Aviv 1999, p. 12 (in Hebrew).

^v Walter Benjamin, "Ueber den Begriff der Geschichte", *Gesammelte Schriften* I.2., Frankfurt a.Main 1974, p. 703.

^w Max Horkheimer, "Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen", *Gesammelte Schriften* VII., Frankfurt a.Main 1985, pp. 385-404.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 389.

^yTheodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklaerung*, Frankfurt a.Main 1988, p. 255.

^z Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *ibid.*, p. 273.

^{aa} Walter Benjamin, *Schriften*, II., Frankfurt a.Main 1982, p. 676.

^{bb} Max Horkheimer, "[Wertfreiheit und Objektivitaet - Max Weber], *Gesammelte Schriften*, VIII., Frankfurt a.Main 1985, p. 259.

^{cc} Max Horkheimer, "Ueber das Vorurteil", *ibid.*, p. 200.

^{dd} Max Horkheimer, "Lehren aus dem Faschismus", *ibid.*, p. 11.

^{ee} Max Horkheimer, "Gedanken zur politische Erziehung", *ibid.*, p. 150.

^{ff} Max Horkheimer, "Die verwaltete Welt kennt keine Liebe", *Gesammelte Schriften* VII., p. 362.

^{gg} Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. Ashton, New York 1973, p. 360.

^{hh} Theodor Adorno *ibid.*, p. 149.

ⁱⁱ Max Horkheimer, "Die Sehnsucht nach dem ganz Anderen", *Gesammelte Schriften* VII., Frankfurt a.Main 1985, p. 386.

^{jj} See such articles such as "Philosophy and learning" (1949), "Academic learning" (1952), "The concept of Bildung" (1952), "Academic freedom" (1953) and "Learning and responsibility" (1954).

^{kk} Max Horkheimer, "Philosophie und Studium", *Gesammelte Schriften* VIII., Frankfurt a.Main 1985, p. 372.

^{ll} Max Horkheimer, *ibid.*, p. 373.

^{mmm} Max Horkheimer, *ibid.*, p. 375.

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- ^{mn} Max Horkheimer, "Begriff der Bildung", *ibid.*, p. 409.
- ^{oo} Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, Jan Masschelein, Nigel Blake, "Reflection, reflectivity and counter-education", *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (forthcoming).
- ^{pp} Emmanuel Levinas, "No identity", *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 166.
- ^{qq} Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, New York 1991.
- ^{rr} Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, "Cyberfeminism and education in the era of the exile of spirit", *Educational Theory* 49: 4 (Fall 1999), p. 442.
- ^{ss} Emmanuel Levinas, "The ego and totality", *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 56.
- ^{tt} Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, Jan Masschelein, Nigel Blake, "Reflection, reflectivity, and counter-education", *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (forthcoming).