"Die Zeit auf ihren Begriff bringen"
A conversation with Antonia Hofstätter, Lydia Goehr, Helena Esther Grass, Martin Jay, Douglas Kellner, Stefan Müller-Doohm, and Sven-Olov Wallenstein

ANTONIA HOFSTÄTTER: In recent years, we have seen a growing tendency to define the present historical moment as exceptional. Symptomatic of this might be the advent of the concept of the Anthropocene, which seems to have coincided with a renewed faith in scientism and an emerging body of theories, such as new materialism or object-oriented ontology. Do you think that the contemporary moment constitutes some form of rupture, as some have claimed? And might this mean that critical theory is particularly relevant today? Or might it mean, on the contrary, that critical theory has become, in some ways, obsolete?

LYDIA GOEHR: I think, sadly, that these times are all too normal, that it is not a time of exception, but a time of normality. It began in 2001, when many of the most extreme consequences of what had been prepared through the '80s and '90s were coming to fruition. I don't see a state of exception, but a sad state of normality, but that's a very dialectical answer. And I think that critical theory can't proclaim itself obsolete, because it's the only theory that actually poses this question about the state of exception and normality. Critical theory can help us to understand the emerging or re-emerging positivism, which we face in the academy and the lack of support for the humanities, and help us to address its consequences. I think this is extremely urgent. Critical theory is able to ask people who put forward certain kinds of empirical questions to reflect on the very questions they pose. This is what Adorno did in the Radio Research Project: not to question the data but to question the questions. Critical theory has a particular role in the academy at the moment.

MARTIN JAY: The question you put about the rupture or the sense of radical newness that we are now experiencing is one with which historians always deal. We just celebrated the centenary of the great October Revolution. And one could argue that this was a turning point and that for seventy-three years there was something new in the world. But, of course, we now know that it was a turning point that didn't really turn. Russia today is closer to Tsarist Russia than to the Soviet Union. So, sometimes turning points were not as radical as

we think. In the past few decades, we have experienced the fall of communism, the fall of apartheid, we have seen the 9/11 catastrophe, we experienced the Great Recession. There have been moments of rupture. And perhaps we can take populism and Trump, in particular, as an indicator of something radically new. But through all that, there has been continuity as well. And one of the points that critical theory always understood was that there is repetition—*das Immergleiche*—beneath the appearance of change. So it's premature to say whether this moment will be a moment of serious rupture in which we reach the tipping point on, say, climate change or refugees or anti-democratic populism. As for the relevance of critical theory, it seems to me that as a body of doctrine, as a stable set of texts, its time has passed. One has to see it as a ruin that we plunder for useful ways to deal with problems of today and tomorrow. We ought not to try to preserve the original moment. Critical theory was open-ended, it was historical, it was experimental, it knew that it was a creature of its own time and that moment has irreparably passed. So it gives us, let's say, potentials for use. But it doesn't give us a set of canonical texts, which we have simply to re-read and follow to the letter.

HELENA GRASS: I also think that we can't really say that critical theory, understood as a closed corpus of texts, remains particularly contemporary. Instead, the writings from the first generation—such as the texts of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse—have to be updated. We are no longer in the period between the 1930s and 1960s; fascism as we knew it in the first half of the 20th century is over. Obviously, the world has changed rather significantly. Though, at the same time, I think that critical thinking and critical theorising is something that we really need in this moment of history, and these 'classical' texts from the tradition of critical theory—such as Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* or Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*—provide certain methods and topics that are still highly relevant if we want to grasp today's situation from a philosophical perspective. Perhaps, we should not only talk about critical theory—though I find this tradition very important—but about *critical thinking*, a thinking informed by critical theory, adapted and applied to present-day problems. I would agree that this moment does not present a complete rupture in history, and yet, there have been some noticeable changes: ten years ago, for instance, it was almost impossible to imagine the rise of populism or the renewed and very real threat of neo-fascist tendencies in many European countries. If you look at these phenomena from a critical perspective, you can step back and make judgements about such developments. And if we judge them as being normatively wrong, then we can begin to reflect on what alter-

natives would be better. I think a critical approach that proceeds from negativity to some kind of positivity can be effective and useful. It's not simply a matter of affirming what we find, but also of stepping back in order to examine and investigate the situation before us. Therefore, I think that critical theory will never be 'out of date' as such—as long as we understand it as a practice of critical thinking rather than a fixed theory. As with all things, critical theory and critical thinking has to change permanently to remain what it actually is: a critical enterprise, which tries to focus on and prioritise the objects it has in view, as Adorno stresses when he talks about the 'priority of the object'. If objects change, critical theory must change, too.

SVEN-OLOV WALLENSTEIN: It is undoubtedly true that the theories emerging around the Anthropocene and various versions of materialism and object-oriented ontology pose a challenge to the tradition of critical theory—not least in the perhaps somewhat ironic sense that some of them can be read as playing on Adorno's claim about the 'priority of the object'. What bothers me, from a philosophical point of view, is that the attempt of these theories to eschew 'correlationism' and to leap into the 'great outside' (to use the terms of perhaps its most serious proponent, Quentin Meillassoux) seems simply to evacuate the whole issue of epistemological checks, and to opt for a kind of speculative discourse that seeks support in what appears more like a philosopher's fantasy of science. I do think that the classical tradition of critical theory—especially Adorno's thoughts on nature—are still pertinent, since despite radically questioning the status of subjectivity, they nevertheless refuse simply to abandon it. In keeping with the Greek etymology of the term, philosophy should remain critical in the sense that it uncovers unexpected and challenging new distinctions—which in turn makes it possible to establish new connections—instead of abandoning itself to some type of "flat ontology" that obliterates the differences between consciousness and things, subjects and objects, intentional and non-intentional entities, etc., which sounds like a new version of the night in which all cows are black.

STEFAN MÜLLER-DOOHM: I'm highly sceptical about the concept of a state of exception, which, of course, goes back to Carl Schmitt. We need a sharp analytical conceptual language to address the structural transformations of modernity and its crisis-ridden developments, a language that is adequate to the phenomena in question. Incidentally, this was the common aim of the various forms of critical theory—from Adorno up to Habermas and Honneth: it was always crucial for them to give the present time its conceptual articu-

lation. With regard to present societies, we face the dual task of investigating the causes of the progressive deformation of majoritarian democracy on the one hand, and of analysing the politically conspicuous forms of emerging nationalisms, nativisms, and populisms on the other. Furthermore, we need to inform people about the dangers of hegemonic global financial capitalism and to foster a greater awareness of rising social inequality in the world—the widening gap between extremely poor and extremely rich countries.

DOUGLAS KELLNER: In the 1960s you had a great upsurge of critical theory, because critical theory was connected with the student movement; it was connected with revolution on a global scale, as well as with social critique and revolt of different sorts. And this was only the time when critical theory was beginning to be translated and understood in its whole history. As for its actuality, in the 1980s you have Reagan, Thatcher, you have a right-wing reaction, and critical theory criticised this conservative revolution, which required radical responses. And then in the 1990s, you have the technological revolution and globalisation. Critical theory was in an excellent position to address both of these phenomena, because there had been a philosophy of technology in critical theory from the beginning. Critical theory formulated the changes from the family-market capitalism, which Marx addressed in the 19th century, to state monopoly capitalism. Thus it was logical that critical theory would address global capitalism, that is, a technological capitalism, in the 1990s, and this project has continued up to today.

ANTONIA HOFSTÄTTER: It seemed to me that there was, if not an open antagonism, then at least an elephant in the room throughout this conference. Namely, a certain tension between the earlier and later generations of critical theory. Some scholars—perhaps most notably Gérard Raulet in his paper on mimesis and reification—advanced the claim that something essential has been lost in the passage from Benjamin and Adorno to the present generation of critical theorists. Do you agree?

STEFAN MÜLLER-DOOHM: Critical theory is an open and plural project, which ought to be pursued as a learning process from one generation to the next. Each of its concepts, whether taken from its older writers—such as Adorno, Horkheimer, or Marcuse—or more recent proponents—such as Habermas and Honneth—as well as contemporary theorists, has its own historical origin and significance. This significance has to prove its mettle in explaining social antagonisms and crises. The different versions of critical theory share the task

of understanding social realities from the perspective of changing historical situations by means of theorising. Critical theory, in all of its variations, aims to uncover the reasons for latent and manifest injustices, discrimination, and repression.

SVEN-OLOV WALLENSTEIN: Whether or not something is lost depends on what you're looking for, and what you assume should be or should have been there in the first place. Obviously, there have been substantial changes: say, the importance of Marx and the analysis of capital, crucial for many of the first generation, seem to have been replaced by theories of communication and consensus formation, while the importance of artworks not just for deciphering the contradictions of the present moment, but also for theory formation itself, seems to have diminished. Whether this is seen as a loss depends on your perspective. For me, the question of loss is less important than the question of what critical theory might become. The task will always be to understand the present in all its ramifications, and, in this context, the question of whether one is faithful to the past is of little use. The question is, rather, how to reinvent the past in order to move ahead. To me, art and aesthetic theory are central issues, which is why I consider the most recent developments, say, from Habermas onwards, to be less helpful. To establish a terrain for dialogue, a set of problems to be carried forward, seems to me a very interesting task.

LYDIA GOEHR: I have a very short answer: if something has been lost, then it applies only to those who have lost it. There are lots of critical theorists, young people in this country, in Germany and in America, who haven't lost something that early critical theory offered. In the last two days, much of the discussion has been about the 'big shots' of critical theory. Yet, if we were to give our attention to the 'little shots' of critical theory, we would see that there are lots of people doing critical theory in all kinds of ways. On the other hand, I do think that there has been a tendency to try to rationalise critical theory, to make it appeal to analytical philosophers, because of the domination of analytical philosophy in America. And people try to convert others by becoming like those others, and there are certainly problems in that regard. But as I said, there are lots of really good critical theorists working in what I deem to be very fruitful ways, with no loss.

MARTIN JAY: I think it's impossible to narrativise the first, second or third generations, either in terms of a super-decline or ascent. That is to say, there has been a continuity: there is a sense in which without Adorno, without

Marcuse, without Horkheimer, one couldn't really understand Habermas's project, and one couldn't understand Honneth's project without Habermas'. But there is also a sense that some of the, let's say, intuitive gestures of the early generation no longer seem as compelling to more recent thinkers. I think one can understand Habermas or Honneth's, let's call it, clarification of the premises of early critical theory—a pushing beyond certain statements about utopia, truth, beauty or goodness that was assumed in this kind of semi-metaphysical way that you find certainly in Benjamin, maybe Adorno, and sometimes in Horkheimer. They forced us to think more clearly about the normative sources of the critical impulses of the early generation. At the same time, some of the semantic energy of those early intuitions may be squandered by the overly clear, overly rational, sometimes rather dry formulations of the second and third generations. I think one of the great virtues of the tradition as a whole is that it does in fact have several generations, where people have been doing things differently. Critical theory has been given a new lease of life, and it is in dialogue with other traditions. I think this is useful in terms of creating an audience and so the audience sees critical theory not as a relic, but as an active interlocutor today.

DOUGLAS KELLNER: I think there has been a differentiation and pluralisation of critical theory from the beginning, starting with the immigration from Germany to America during World War II. And then, after the war, Adorno, Horkheimer, Pollock, and others returned to Germany, while Marcuse, Fromm and Löwenthal stayed in the United States. And in the 1970s and '80s, some scholars followed Habermas. I think it is true that there is some division between Habermasians and the original critical theory school. But there are many of us, who (exactly as others on this panel have indicated) see richness, variety, diversity, and important themes in all of these thinkers, whose work we can still use and apply today. So the relevance of critical theory seems still timely. Particularly, if you have this broad range of theories, there are bound to be certain ideas that are appropriate to analyse recent phenomena, such as authoritarian populism, Donald Trump, biotechnology, and other current issues.

HELENA GRASS: For me, it is difficult to talk about the first, the second, the third, and maybe even the fourth generation of critical theory, because each scholar in every generation is so different. Just take Adorno and his deep negativity, Marcuse and his account of utopia, or Horkheimer's strict materialism—they are distinct from one another. But they can equally be brought into dialogue

with each other, as Adorno and Horkheimer demonstrated in practice. We find many different approaches in what we call 'critical theory' and we don't have to stick to any one of them in any orthodox way. On the contrary, we should consider ourselves to be free to take from each what might seem useful for our theorising. I think, for example, that Marcuse's concept of utopia fits together well with Adorno's negativity. We have a broad variety of themes and tools, which we can combine in any way we want—as long as it works. I think this kind of eclecticism can be a very productive way of doing critical theory. By picking what we want from each approach and by combining the methods and contents of each we can achieve good philosophy, sociology, political theory, etc. This enterprise is what we might call 'the future of critical theory'.

ANTONIA HOFSTÄTTER: Lastly, I'd like each of you to reflect on the last two days of this conference and to pick one moment or one issue that has contributed something new to your understanding of critical theory. Has there been anything that has challenged or reinforced your views of what it is that we do when we do critical theory?

HELENA GRASS: What I discovered during the last one and a half days is that I don't really have a clue what critical theory actually is. Since we have heard about epistemology, ontology, ethics, moral philosophy and also aesthetics, it's very difficult to define a single criterion or even a bunch of criteria to understand what critical theory actually *is*. Certainly, it has something to do with social emancipation, normativity, the relentless questioning of how things came to be; and it is an anti-positivist approach. I think it is crucial that there were scholars from many countries, from different generations and with different interests, and yet the conference still somehow cohered. So there must be some common ground, even if we can't pin it down. Maybe there is some kind of 'family resemblance', to use Wittgenstein's phrase. The conference demonstrated that critical theory is definitely still alive, that it remains quite a rich concept—and that it can be and *should* be developed even further.

MARTIN JAY: On the one hand, the generalisation of the concept 'critical theory' seems to imply that there is something common, something uniform, something we could create as a kind of brand that exists over time. On the other, there is this nominalist impulse, the impulse which says, 'now, wait a minute, Adorno wasn't saying the same thing as Marcuse, Fromm isn't arguing the same thing as Horkheimer'. So a conference like this is a site for the performance of that tension. Can we in fact find a unifying way to make the con-

cept of critical theory meaningful, or are we engaged in a kind of open-ended search for something that could be relevant within a larger project? It seems to me that it is probably better to talk about *critical theorising* than critical theory, and that the activity of doing it is more important than the attempt to define it. We should think of critical theory as *in process* and this conference is a little piece of that process, which seems to be going on in many different places in the world.

DOUGLAS KELLNER: Well, the conference, with its variety and diversity of critical theorists, was a very rich one. Just to start with today, we had some very interesting papers that talked about both philosophical and aesthetic themes within critical theory. Over the last couple of days, we had all kinds of different papers on Habermas, on Adorno, on Marcuse, and we heard about Erich Fromm. To me this was very valuable in seeing the different perspectives. And it struck me that there was no conflict—with maybe a couple of exceptions—between the various schools of critical theory, just friendly dialogue. I also found a friendliness of dialogue between mostly Germans, Swedes and a couple of Americans. I thought it was a good sort of intercultural communication between the different groups.

SVEN-OLOV WALLENSTEIN: I think that the core issue, 'The Future of Critical Theory,' remained unanswered, perhaps rightly so. There was a wealth of historical analyses, interrogations of particular texts and thinkers, but a certain hesitation to map out a path towards the future—or perhaps, to use the plural form, *futures*, since the tradition appears evermore complex the more we look at it, which also means that the paths ahead must be multiple. What is clear is that the tasks that were once delineated at the beginning of this tradition have not disappeared. Rather, they must be grasped by vocabularies and concepts that can integrate the various changes in society, philosophy, the sciences, and the arts that have occurred in the interim between then and now.

STEFAN MÜLLER-DOOHM: The conference showed that open discussion and a readiness to engage in controversies have an illuminating and progressive function. During the course of the conference, it became clear that one cannot just stop at reconstructing critical theory from the perspective of a history of ideas. On the contrary, one has to draw on the whole spectrum of critical theory to address present problems. It seems to me to be particularly vital to build bridges between these critical analyses of the present so as to be better able to make interventions into the realm of the political public. Critical theory has to

leave the ivory tower and be transformed into political practice—in the characteristic way in which, at different times, Adorno and Habermas pursued critical theory as public intellectuals. As an intellectual practice, critical theory has the task of advocating the enforcement of human rights. I agree with Habermas when he said that human rights form a realistic utopia that grounds the ideal goal of a just society in the institution of the constitutional state itself.

LYDIA GOEHR: I am not sure I have anything more to add. Parts of it have already been said about the richness and variety of approaches and so on. The only thing that I would say about the conference, as suggested by my last answer, is that I would have liked to have heard from younger people in the field. I think one of the tendencies of the aging process is that we come with well-formed views and we look for a way of affirming our views. We all have a standpoint, although critical theory is very much against 'standpoint-philosophy'. I feel myself bored by my own questions, which just re-affirm my own self-interests in particular subjects. So, if anything, it shows me that I wish I were not quite so old.