Does Critical Theory Have a Theoretical Obligation to Engage in Social-Ontological Theorisation?

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Abstract: Recent scholarship on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and social ontology suggests that the two fields can engage in a mutually enriching dialogue. In particular, it has been argued that because critical theory necessarily makes social-ontological assumptions, it can draw on resources from social ontology to articulate these assumptions more explicitly. While I am sympathetic to this intellectual cross-pollination, I argue that although critical theory necessarily relies on social-ontological assumptions, it is theoretically obligated to engage in social ontology only when failing to do so hinders the attainment of its stated aims. In this article, I distinguish between internally relevant and externally relevant social-ontological theorisation. The former is warranted by the critical-theoretical account itself, whereas the latter, while potentially yielding valuable insights, is not essential to it. This distinction is illustrated and developed through an analysis of Jürgen Habermas's colonisation thesis and its ancillary theses on rationalisation and integration. The analysis of Habermas's ideas also serves to construct a criteria framework for determining when critical theory is theoretically obligated to engage in social-ontological theorisation.

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Recent work by scholars sympathetic to the tradition of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and who are also well-versed in social ontology, suggests that, rather than being antithetical, critical theory and social ontology can engage in a fruitful and mutually enriching dialogue. In particular, it has been suggested that given that critical theory must necessarily make social-ontological assumptions, it could use conceptual resources developed in social ontology to articulate its assumptions explicitly. This latter suggestion rests on the view that critical theory's engagement with social-ontological theorisation is not only fruitful but warranted, given the inescapability of its social-ontological commitments. By taking the perspective of critical theory, I shall inquire whether critical theorists are theoretically obliged to engage in systematic social-ontological theorisation. If this obligation is not unconditional but only qualified, as I shall argue below, I shall then examine when critical theorists are required to engage in such theorisation. The question posed in this article is too intricate to be answered exhaustively in a single article. For this reason, it should be read as an initial contribution to addressing whether critical theory is theoretically obliged to engage in social-ontological theorisation, showing how this question can be addressed through the examination of one thesis from a single critical theorist.

       The remainder of the article is divided into five sections. In section 2, I shall briefly introduce the two general fields of critical theory and social ontology and refer to a few recent contributions that argue for a happy marriage between the two. In section 3, I shall then make some important distinctions that I believe are essential for the present inquiry, explain how one can go about answering the question this article poses, and, most importantly, argue that critical theory should be theoretically obligated to engage with social-ontological questions only when failure to do so jeopardises its stated aims. In the second part of this article (sections 4–6), I shall examine the colonisation thesis of Jürgen Habermas with the aim of determining whether it requires social-ontological theorisation. In section 4, I shall provide an overview of Habermas's colonisation thesis and the ancillary theses on which it rests. In section 5, I shall then distinguish between social-ontological questions that, even though related to the colonisation thesis and its ancillary theses, do not affect their validity or lack thereof and social-ontological questions whose

relevance is internally warranted by Habermas's own account. Finally, in section 6, I shall generalise the results of the discussion of section 5 into criteria meant to indicate when critical theory must engage in social-ontological theorisation. In this section, I shall present a general yet incomplete criteria framework which needs to be expanded and developed further through continued reflection on the question posed in this article.

2.   CRITICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

Since its beginning in the 1930s, critical theory has been concerned with developing theoretical work with a practical intent, seeking to diagnose oppressive social relations and propose ways to improve the condition of humankind. As Max Horkheimer claims in one of his earliest writings, the goal of critical theory is not merely the production of knowledge but the liberation of humanity from "slavery" by creating "a world which satisfies the needs and powers of men" (Horkheimer 2002a, 246). In a similar vein, Herbert Marcuse asserts that critical theory is "concern[ed] with human happiness" which can be brought about "only through the transformation of the material conditions of existence" (Marcuse 2009, 100). Critical theory, Marcuse further claims, has as its goal "the rational organization of society," understood as "the subordination of the economy to the individuals' needs" (Marcuse 2009, 106). The self-reflexivity and emancipatory commitments of critical theory are clearly evident in Horkheimer's well-known distinction between traditional and critical theory: a defining difference between the two is that whereas traditional theory conceives its object as separate from the subject, the reality under investigation as distinct from the researcher conducting the investigation, critical theory sees itself as embedded in a matrix of social relations, committed to changing them for the better and resolved not to fall into "quietism or conformism" by pretending to be or deceiving itself into believing it is, neutral and detached (Horkheimer 2002b, 229).

Social ontology is concerned with determining what sorts of beings populate the social world, how social objects, human social groups and organisations, social systems, and social structures exist, and whether and how such realities exert causal influence. The field of study of social ontology can be understood as a subfield of the more general field of ontology (Gould 1978, xv), with social ontology being a domain-specific ontology. Such domain-specific ontologies are sometimes referred to as regional or special ontologies (Benton and Craib 2011, 5) or scientific ontologies (Chernoff 2009, 372). Social ontology can be understood as serving primarily an explanatory

function, aimed at providing "a deeper understanding of social phenomena" (Searle 2010, 5), or as serving a more instrumental function contributing to making informed and correct policy decisions in a complex world (Byrne and Callaghan, 2014). In the latter case, social-ontological theorisation is linked to practice; however, such a theory-practice relation is different from that found in critical theory, as it takes an expert-interventionist approach without seeking to challenge current relations of power.

At first glance, critical theory and social ontology seem to be driven by incompatible motivations. Viewed in terms of Horkheimer's distinction between traditional and critical theory, social-ontological research that seeks to describe and explain the ontological structures of the social world, or to intervene in the social world to make technical changes to it seems to belong to the family of traditional theories (Testa 2016, 57; Renault 2016, 18). This apparent incompatibility between critical theory and social ontology is rightly being challenged by some scholars today. For example, one such scholar, Italo Testa, offers a reading of the work of the early Horkheimer, which is in no way antithetical to social-ontological pursuits; on the contrary, he argues that the early Horkheimer considered social ontology to be an integral part of the critical theory programme (Testa 2015, 273–5; 2016, 48, 60–62).

In the last few years, scholars such as Testa, who are sympathetic to the tradition of critical theory have started making the case for a fruitful dialogue between critical theory and social ontology (Testa, 2015, 2016; Renault, 2016; Thompson, 2017; Stahl, 2022). The reasons offered by these scholars to justify such dialogue are quite similar. Testa, who argues that both critical theory and analytic social ontology à la John Searle need to learn from each other, claims that critical theory needs to do social ontology both to make its own social-ontological assumptions explicit and to fully realise its interdisciplinary mission (Testa 2016, 48, 52–3, 55; 2015, 272, 276). He is adamant that critical theory is not simply compatible with social ontology but requires it since, in proposing its critique of society, it generally offers, whether explicitly or implicitly, accounts of the architecture of the social (Testa 2016, 58). He proposes a fusion of critical theory and social ontology in the form of critical social ontology, which engages with social-ontological questions but at the same time retains the critical orientation which characterises it (Testa 2016, 290). In a similar vein, Michael J. Thompson argues for a new paradigm of critical theory in the form of critical social ontology, one that moves away from "the epistemic reason-giving and linguistic-discursive theories" (think of Habermas here) to one that looks more closely at the way the social world is constituted. Thompson continues by arguing that only if critical theory does

so can it diagnose *objective* pathologies pertaining to contemporary society (Thompson 2017, 19).

As the above-mentioned theorists argue, there is no doubt that any critical theory in critiquing the social must presuppose some form of social ontology. While recent work linking critical theory and social ontology has shown that at least some ideas developed in critical theory can indeed benefit from an engagement with social-ontological theorisation (Testa, 2015, 2016; Renault, 2016; Thompson, 2017; Stahl, 2022), claiming that any critical theoretical work must be transformed into critical social-ontological imposes a time-consuming burden for critical theory which might diminish the attention dedicated to critique. What I mean by "burden" here is that the critical theorist must, at the same time, also do social-ontological work. While I am convinced that critical theory can benefit from engaging with social-ontological work, I want to critically assess the call for this engagement. I want to argue that this extra burden should be assumed by the critical theorist if, when, and to the extent that not carrying such a burden jeopardises the enterprise of critical theory. In other words, critical theory should feel (theoretically) obligated to become critical social ontology only when not doing so jeopardises its own aims. The question that naturally follows from this is the following: when does ignoring social-ontological questions jeopardise the aims of critical theory?

3.   CLARIFICATIONS, DISTINCTIONS, AND THE WAY FORWARD

Manuel DeLanda argues that any philosophical inquiry necessarily makes ontological commitments, and if it fails to reflect on such ontological commitments, it ends up with an "uncritically accepted and poorly analyzed" ontology (DeLanda 2013, 71). If DeLanda's claim is applied restrictively to accounts of the social and their presuppositions about social ontology (and not to any philosophical inquiry and its presupposed ontology), and if one adopts an open-minded approach that does not immediately assume that social-ontological presuppositions necessarily require social-ontological theorisation, one can work out two theses. I will refer to these two theses as the "Strong Thesis of Social-Ontological Commitments" and the "Weak Thesis of Social-Ontological Commitments." The two theses can be formulated as follows:

> **Strong Thesis of   Social-Ontological Commitments.** Any social account makes social-ontological commitments, which, if left unanalysed and unarticulated, *render* the social account unclear and uncritical.

> **Weak Thesis of Social-Ontological Commitments.** Any social account makes social-ontological commitments, which, if left unanalysed and unarticulated, *may render* the social account unclear and uncritical.

The difference between the two theses is straightforward. Whereas the strong thesis requires any social inquiry to engage in some degree of social-ontological theorisation and failure to do so jeopardises the fulfilment of the inquiry's aims, the weak thesis, while acknowledging that social-ontological commitments are inescapable, leaves open the question of whether engaging in social-ontological theorisation is necessary. The strong thesis implies that because critical social theory proposes accounts of the social in order to conduct critique, it is theoretically obliged to engage in social-ontological theorisation. What I mean by social-ontological theorisation is the kind of theorisation one finds in works on social ontology. Such works include, but are not limited to, analytic social ontology à la John Searle (1995, 2010) and Raimo Tuomela (2007, 2013), critical realist social ontology à la Dave Elder-Vass (2010, 2012) and Tony Lawson (2019), and assemblage theory à la Manuel DeLanda (2006). Moreover, by social-ontological theorisation, I do not merely mean that the theorist makes their social-ontological commitments explicit (i.e., articulated) but that they also justify them in the light of competing models and actively engage (though not necessarily exhaustively) with such models to properly locate their social ontology within the contemporary social-ontological landscape (i.e., analysed). The weak thesis only implies that because critical social theory proposes accounts of the social in order to conduct critique, it may at times require engagement in social-ontological theorisation. The question that must be answered first is: which of the two theses is rationally preferable?

I want to argue that the weak thesis is rationally preferable. I will offer two reasons to justify this position. Firstly, that a field of study or a discipline presupposes another field of study or discipline in a similar way that critical theory or accounts of the social in general must presuppose some social ontology is relatively common in knowledge discovery and production. For instance, while physics is a more fundamental field than biology, we do not consider it necessary for biologists to train as physicists before conducting research in biology. Of course, this does not mean that biologists should never appeal to work in physics, but rather that they should do so only when required by the needs and aims of specific research.

Secondly, accounts of the social, even though they must necessarily presuppose some kind of social ontology, may still be intelligible or function adequately within the scope of a particular investigation without engaging in social-ontological theorisation. Consider the following two propositions:

1. The banking crisis was partially caused by a run on a bank, with the latter being caused by the rumour that Bank X was close to insolvency.
2. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, has led to the displacement of millions of Ukrainians.

Both propositions describe events that took or could take place in the social world, broadly understood. Moreover, both propositions use terms that could be unpacked and analysed in social-ontological terms. For example, in what sense does a bank exist? Are rumours or beliefs causally effective? When does a crisis subsist, and how does it exist? What is the ontological status of states such as Russia and Ukraine? Are states causally effective as states? Is the term "state" a shorthand description of a more dense and complex set of relations between human beings, a descriptor of emergent realities, or some combination of both? These social-ontological questions might yield interesting and illuminating results. However, it is reasonable to assume that, in some contexts—even in accounts that aim to describe and explain social processes—such accounts can adequately serve explanatory and descriptive purposes without engaging in social-ontological theorisation. The point here is that just because an account of the social can be analysed in social-ontological terms, it does not follow that it should. Stated differently, just because a claim or a set of claims about social reality presupposes a social ontology in some form, it does not follow that the proponent is theoretically obliged to engage in social-ontological theorisation.

In light of the above two reasons, I would like to briefly outline some important distinctions and clarifications that will serve as guiding norms and ideas in the remainder of this article. Firstly, it is essential to distinguish between presupposing some form of social ontology and engaging in active, detailed social-ontological theorisation; while the former seems to be inescapable in accounts of the social, the latter should not be assumed to be a necessary requirement for accounts of the social or for research whose aim is not explicitly social-ontological theorisation. The added value of social-ontological theorisation may sometimes be minimal for research that is not primarily social-ontological. Secondly, it is essential to distinguish between critical theoretical work (or any work concerning the social, for that matter) that could be developed further using tools and concepts that broadly belong to the field

of study of social ontology and critical theoretical work (again, or any work concerning the social) that cannot function properly or succeed in doing what it aims to do without social-ontological theorisation. In the case of the former, developing the presupposed social ontology of critical theory further might illuminate aspects of social reality that could be useful for critical theory, but it might also prove to be a sterile exercise adding little or nothing to its aims.

The acceptance of the weak thesis raises the question of when critical theory is required to engage in social-ontological theorisation. The weak thesis states that avoiding social-ontological theorisation "may render the social account unclear and uncritical." Therefore, the question that must be raised and answered now is: when does a lack of social-ontological theorisation render a social account unclear and uncritical? This question calls for both a clarification of what constitutes unclarity and non-criticality in an account of the social, and criteria for determining when the critical theorist should pause to engage in social-ontological theorisation before proceeding with their critique. An account is unclear if it is ambiguous due to multiple plausible interpretations, vague due to a lack of specificity, or relatively incomplete due to missing warranted details. An account is uncritical if it makes claims that require justification but fails to provide it.[1]

Having clarified what makes an account unclear or uncritical, the next step is to determine the criteria for when a critical theorist should engage in social-ontological theorisation. This task can be approached in at least two ways. The first way is to assess whether critical theory in general can afford to ignore social-ontological questions without undermining itself. This approach is fruitful only if the different critical theoretical contributions are sufficiently similar to make their collective assessment both methodologically practical and rational. I find this approach hasty and potentially inattentive to detail. Generic assessments, while they might help reveal general trends, are not well-equipped to provide detailed analysis. The second approach is to focus on details first, working incrementally from the ground up to build a broader conclusion. This second approach cannot be executed in one article but requires a series of interventions that ultimately aim to arrive at some generalised conclusion on the basis of particularistic analyses. While this second approach is more time-consuming and demanding, it does greater justice to a living tradition that has

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1   While a broader conception that includes ideological critique, reflexivity, and normative assessment may capture more dimensions of criticality, I am using a minimal notion of "critical" here, referring specifically to the requirement that claims be justified. An excessively expansive notion risks making theory production impossible by requiring an endless interrogation of assumptions.

produced a vast and, at times, methodologically and substantively diverse body of work.

In line with the piecemeal approach, for the remainder of this article, I want to focus on one thesis of a specific critical theorist and assess whether this thesis can function without robust social-ontological theorisation and, if it cannot, what kind of social-ontological theorisation it requires. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, if this specific thesis is found to be lacking due to the absence of a social-ontological grounding, I want to propose a generalised criterion or set of criteria that would function as guiding norms meant to prescribe, or at least indicate, *when* critical theory is required to engage in social-ontological theorisation. The emphasis on the "when" is crucial here. Since the weak thesis states that social-ontological theorisation in the case of critical theory is not necessarily required, it becomes imperative to inquire into when such theorisation is needed. The conclusions drawn in the remainder of this article cannot be exhaustive, as they are based on the examination of a single thesis, and other theses may suggest different criteria. However, the proposed criteria should still be considered definitive (even if incomplete), since if they apply to one thesis, they must, as guiding norms, also apply to other theses.

The thesis I will engage with for the remainder of this article is Habermas's colonisation thesis, which he developed in his second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1987). This thesis has been widely criticised by both sympathisers and non-sympathisers of Habermas's critical theory. It is important to note at this juncture that the purpose of the following discussion is not to defend the colonisation thesis *per se,* even if social-ontological theorisation may help counter specific criticisms; the point of the below discussion is to assess whether the colonisation thesis necessitates social-ontological theorisation, and if it does, work out criteria that can guide critical theorists in determining when they should engage in social ontology.

4.   THE COLONISATION THESIS

The colonisation thesis rests on the communication and social theory Habermas develops in the two volumes of the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984; 1987).[2] Central to the colonisation thesis are Habermas's lifeworld-system distinction and his theory of rationalisation. The terms "lifeworld" and "system" are used by Habermas in methodological and substantive senses. Methodologically, "lifeworld" and "system" refer to two analytical

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2   The accounts presented in these works build upon previous work. See, for example, Habermas (1998), originally published 1976.

viewpoints of society. The lifeworld viewpoint refers to viewing society from the perspective of social actors who participate in social interaction with the aim of achieving action coordination (Habermas 1987, 118, 148, 150–1). This perspective draws upon the interpretivist tradition (*Verstehen* sociology) (1987, 148), which explains social interaction as exchanges between actors conceived as producers and users of meaning who come to an understanding and potentially, agreement, on various aspects of their social life. When social scientists and social theorists adopt this perspective, they frame their explanation in terms of meaning-imbued actions. By contrast, the system viewpoint refers to viewing society as a system that differentiates into subsystems, each responsible for fulfilling specific functions (1987, 154, 160). Unlike the lifeworld perspective, which takes a micro-level, agentic approach to investigating society, the system perspective takes a macro-level, systemic approach, treating society as a self-regulating system (1987, 151).

Crucial to understanding Habermas's colonisation thesis, however, is the lifeworld-system distinction understood in a substantive sense. In this sense, the lifeworld refers to three components that together constitute the symbolic infrastructure of society and sustain symbolic processes: personality, culture, and society. The personality component refers to the competences social actors require in order to be able to meaningfully engage in linguistic communication (1987, 138). The component of culture refers to the "stock of knowledge" that social actors employ in their communicative interactions, allowing them to share a common understanding of the world, both natural and social (1987, 138). Finally, the component of society refers to shared norms of action that provide stability and solidarity in social interactions (1987, 138). The lifeworld is not a static reality but a dynamic one, continuously reproduced through social interactions (1987, 140–4). This reproduction occurs primarily through linguistic means and, in rationalised societies (more on this below), through what Habermas refers to as communicative action, i.e., action oriented toward understanding (1987, 142). Thus, the lifeworld also extends to those domains of interaction in which the three components of personality (as competences), culture (as stock of knowledge), and society (as background norms of interaction) play—or rather, should play, as I will explain below—crucial roles in social coordination. Domains of this kind include educational institutions and the family (1987, 368).

System in a substantive sense refers to those domains of interaction that acquire a certain degree of independence from the three components of the lifeworld, and which, while still retaining language as a means of communication, rely heavily on what Habermas refers to as steering media

(1987, 183; see also his 1991, 256–7). As examples of steering media, Habermas gives money and power, with the former functioning as a medium of interaction in the economic system, whereas the latter fulfilling a similar function in the bureaucratic system (1987, 307). A defining feature of these systems is their ability to *technicise* interactions by reducing the possible responses participants can opt for in interaction through the conditioning of decisions and actions (1987, 281; see also his 1984, 430n23). This conditioning of decisions and actions occurs primarily through steering media, which, according to Habermas, reduces communicative complexity. The conditioning of decisions and actions becomes particularly apparent when social actors employ money as a medium of interaction in the economic system: interaction in buying and selling processes is essentially carried out through the medium of money, and system-relevant and system-appropriate communications are reduced to a minimum, involving mainly making the price known and either accepting by paying or rejecting by not paying the requested price.

Habermas employs the lifeworld-system distinction in a substantive sense in the context of his proposed theses of rationalisation. He argues that contemporary Western societies have undergone two distinct rationalisation processes. The first, which he terms the rationalisation of the lifeworld, broadly refers to the increasing subjection of claims—particularly claims about reality in a broad sense and normative claims regarding interpersonal conduct—to rational scrutiny. In this context, rationality is characterised by an increase in discursive and justificatory reasoning (1987, 107, 146). This first rationalisation process brings about significant changes to the way social order—crucial to the functioning of any society—is generated and maintained. In premodern societies, according to Habermas, social order was stabilised by an overarching and pervasive religious-metaphysical worldview that provided content for both truth claims and normative issues. In rationalised societies, by contrast, social order must be sustained through consensus-oriented discursive and justificatory processes (1987, 146). These changes heighten the risk of disagreement and render social order more contingent and fragile. To counteract this fragility and contingency, Habermas argues, a second rationalisation process became necessary. This second process involves the emergence of media systems—specifically, economic and bureaucratic systems—that insulate economic and bureaucratic interactions through mediatisation (the use of money and bureaucratic power) and technicisation (the conditioning of actions and decisions). These mechanisms ensure that such interactions remain relatively insulated from the time-

consuming demands of discursive and justificatory processes (1987, 181). In other words, the economic and bureaucratic systems develop system-specific rationalities that secure efficiency and efficacy.

The lifeworld-system distinction (in a substantive sense) and the corresponding rationalisation of each must be understood in relation to two mechanisms of social order: social integration and system integration. Habermas's use of these notions departs David Lockwood's (1976) original use as methodological approaches to understanding society, turning them into real and distinct social mechanisms (Habermas 1987, 117). According to Habermas's view, social integration refers to social order or, more precisely, action coordination, "established by a normatively secured or communicatively achieved consensus" (1987, 117), whereas system integration refers to "nonnormative regulation of individual decisions that extends beyond the actors' consciousnesses" (1987, 117). In this context, the term "nonnormative" should be understood as a form of regulation (primarily legal) that insulates routine operations from potential discursive contestation. For instance, in a bureaucratic system, top-down authority must be presumed, and subordinates need not agree with the normative or truth content of the orders of their superiors—and the well-functioning of the system itself cannot afford repeated contestations by subordinates—in order to execute them. Habermas argues that social integration typically manifests in lifeworldly contexts of interaction, whereas system integration emerges as the primary mechanism of social order within media systems (i.e., economic and bureaucratic systems). It is also important to observe that while Habermas views social integration as a mechanism that is under the control of social actors, system integration—as a social ordering mechanism and process—seems to acquire some degree of operational independence from the lifeworld. In this regard, Habermas describes system integration as operating "beyond the actors' consciousness" (1987, 117) and "'behind the backs' of participants" (1996, 39), strongly suggesting the said operational independence.

After developing the underlying social theoretical architecture, Habermas then proposes his critical theoretical thesis: the colonisation thesis. He explains it as follows:

> The thesis of internal colonization states that the subsystems of the economy and state become more and more complex as a consequence of capitalist growth, and penetrate ever deeper into the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld. (Habermas 1987, 367)

According to this thesis, certain social domains—such as the family and education—cannot be ordered through the logic of system integration "without pathological side effects" (1987, 323, 368). Colonisation occurs when mediatisation—interactions through the media of money and power and according to the logic pertaining to the economic and bureaucratic systems— "suppress[es] forms of social integration even in those areas where a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced" (1987, 196). In other words, colonisation involves the assimilation of lifeworld domains into the bureaucratic and economic systems (1987, 355).

5.   SOCIAL ONTOLOGY AND THE COLONISATION THESIS

The colonisation thesis, along with its underlying social theoretical framework— particularly the rationalisation of the lifeworld, systemic rationalisation (i.e., the emergence of bureaucratic and economic systems as semi-autonomous systems), and the substantive distinction between lifeworld and systems—raise, or can raise, a myriad of social-ontological questions. These questions fall into two categories: those that, while amenable to social-ontological analysis, do not affect the explanatory and critical work the colonisation thesis is meant to accomplish, and those that, if left unanswered, render the colonisation thesis unclear and uncritical. I argue that the colonisation thesis and its ancillary theses can do without the first set of questions and their answers. The second set of questions, by contrast, is central to the success or failure of the thesis, as ignoring this group of questions would render the thesis uncriticisable. I will return to this latter point below.

Questions that belong to the first group include:

a. In what sense do culture and society (as components of the lifeworld) exist? In other words, what is the ontological status of the "stock of knowledge" that provides resources for common or sufficiently common interpretations among members of the same community and of norms that regulate group membership and enable solidarity? Furthermore, where are culture and society located?

b. How are the steering media of money and bureaucratic power constituted? Are they the result of collective intentionality?

c. How is law constituted? Is it also a product of collective intentionality? Does modern law require some kind of collective memory register in order to exist and function?

The three sets of questions (a, b, and c) are interesting and maybe worth pursuing for philosophical reasons. However, would answering them affect the validity or invalidity of the colonisation thesis or the rationalisation theses? In my view, while pursuing such questions might add interesting details to Habermas's account, it probably would not add anything of value to the aims of the thesis. For example, for Habermas's argument to succeed, the social-ontological mechanisms involved in the creation and maintenance of money are largely irrelevant or, at most, of minimal importance. What matters is simply that there exists a medium called money that facilitates certain types of social interactions, namely economic transactions. Similarly, does it matter for Habermas's argument where norms and the stock of knowledge are located? I do not think it does. What matters is that, in seeking action coordination, social actors must have a sufficiently shared understanding of the world and a sufficiently similar normative orientation. When such background agreement is lacking, these differences can be thematised—provided there is still enough common ground for communication to function effectively.

On the other hand, Habermas's colonisation thesis and its supporting theses do necessitate a certain degree of social-ontological theorisation. However, as I will argue below, this necessity is internally generated and not invariantly imposed from the outside. This brings me to the second set of social-ontological questions raised by the colonisation thesis and its ancillary theses. These include the following:

> d. In what sense do the media systems of money and power (the economic and bureaucratic systems) operate beyond the social actors' consciousness and behind their backs? How does system integration operate in these systems? Is Habermas ascribing emergent causal powers to such systems?

> e. Related to (d), in what sense do the economic and bureaucratic systems exist? How are their boundaries constituted? Is Habermas making use of a hierarchical or multileveled social ontology?

> f. Also related to (d), is colonisation an effect of the emergent causal powers of media systems?

The second set of questions (d, e, and f) are unavoidable social-ontological questions that Habermas's own account implies. Their unavoidability follows from the kind of explanation and critique Habermas employs in his work. For the colonisation thesis and its ancillary theses to succeed in explaining and

critiquing, the second group of questions must be answered clearly and in a way that directly involves social-ontological theorisation. It matters whether we are dealing with systems that acquire emergent properties and powers, as this affects the nature of the explanation, the kind of critique that can be advanced, and the possibilities for mitigating social pathologies in pursuit of a more rational society. It is one thing if colonisation is conceptualised exclusively in terms of a flat social ontology, where the transfer of the logic of media systems into lifeworld contexts of interaction results merely from decisions made by social actors in positions of political and social authority. It is quite another if systemic forces are at play—forces that, while emerging from interactions between social actors, acquire a degree of independence from their conscious decisions and exert pressure on social interaction and the organisation of society in a specific direction (i.e., towards colonisation). The choice between these two perspectives has significant implications for how we approach the question of how colonisation can be halted or reversed. Moreover, the second set of social-ontological questions (d, e, and f) matter not only because they strike at the core of Habermas's theses but also because failure to tackle them in a detailed manner renders Habermas's central thesis partially uncriticisable. Unless the mechanisms underlying colonisation and related social processes are clearly articulated, readers of Habermas's work cannot make reasonable and informed objections to his thesis. By not delving into these social-ontological questions, Habermas presents a black box explanation in which the mechanisms presumably responsible for colonisation remain opaque. The colonisation thesis is not simply meant to *report* the social fact that certain spheres of interaction, such as education and family, are being subjected to the logic of media systems but also to *explain* how this subjection happens. The latter cannot be ascertained unless social-ontological questions of the kind listed above (d, e, and f) are tackled seriously. The colonisation thesis is too important to the argument of the two volumes of *The Theory of Communicative Action* to be characterised by such ambiguity.

To recapitulate: the difference between the first set of questions (a, b, and c) and the second set of questions (d, e, and f) is that the former is only externally relevant to the colonisation thesis, whereas the latter is internally relevant. What I mean by "externally relevant" and "internally relevant" is that the former would not affect the validity or lack thereof of the colonisation thesis as long as culture (as shared knowledge and interpretative schemes), society (as shared norms), money, bureaucratic power, and law are taken to be real (without going into how such reality is constructed and maintained). By contrast, failure to tackle the latter set does affect the validity of the colonisation

thesis. According to this distinction, the "externally relevant" is irrelevant to the validity of the argument, whereas what is "internally relevant" is not. Rejection of this distinction—though not necessarily my categorisation of *what is and what is not* "internally relevant"—would imply that the critical theorist is theoretically obliged to begin with a fully developed social ontology before engaging in critical theory. This, in turn, raises the spectre of an even more radical obligation: that one cannot engage in critical theory unless one first undertakes a form of first philosophy that is even more foundational than social ontology.

6.   GENERAL CRITERIA ON WHEN SOCIAL-ONTOLOGICAL THEORISATION IS WARRANTED

The distinction between internally and externally relevant social-ontological theorisation can serve as an initial basis for developing criteria that determine when critical theory must engage with social ontology. I want to characterise the idea of internal relevance in more precise terms by characterising it in terms of the following two sub-criteria: firstly, whether the principal argument of the account is criticisable or not, and secondly, whether the account, if it relies on a causal explanation, offers an opaque or clear causal explanation. I argue that the colonisation thesis is partially uncriticisable because it contains an opaque or unclear causal account. The lack of clarity in the thesis stems from the fact that the reader cannot precisely identify the principal causal links and underlying mechanisms responsible for colonisation. For the colonisation thesis to acquire the degree of clarity it needs to become criticisable, it must be supported by explanations that clarify whether systems possess causal powers *qua* systems, and if so, how these systemic causal mechanisms function. Habermas does not explicitly state whether colonisation is a systemic phenomenon in a strong sense—where media systems can be said to be causally responsible *qua* systems due to possessing emergent properties—or in a weaker sense, where conscious social actors are ultimately responsible for transposing the logic of mediatisation onto lifeworld domains. While there are indications that Habermas inclines toward the stronger claim—by claiming that system integration operates "beyond the actors' consciousness" (Habermas 1987, 117) and "'behind the backs' of participants" (Habermas 1996, 39)—he never explains its underlying social ontology. The causal explanatory opacity renders the account of the colonisation thesis partially uncriticisable. What I mean by the account being partially uncriticisable is that one cannot fully assess the validity of the colonisation thesis due to its lack of clarity, that is to say, due to

its causal explanatory opacity.

The two characteristics of internal relevance do not operate on the same epistemic level. Indeed, I want to argue that the account is uncriticisable *because* it lacks clarity in its causal explanation. However, since these criteria are being developed based only on one thesis of one critical theorist, I want to avoid committing myself to the claim that an account can only be uncriticisable because of causal explanatory opacity. Other factors may also render an account uncriticisable. Moreover, I do not wish to commit to the view that internal relevance is exclusively a matter of uncriticisability. There may be additional reasons why social-ontological theorisation is necessary in a critical-theoretical account beyond the issue of uncriticisability. Thus, at this stage, the criteria framework, if represented diagrammatically, would appear as in Figure 1.
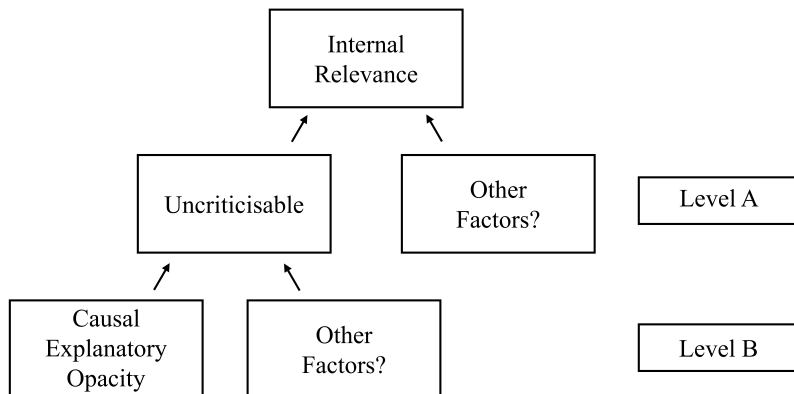

Figure 1. Conditions for the Internal Relevance of Social-Ontological Theorisation
Source: Author's own illustration

The above figure should be read in the following way: social-ontological theorisation is required—or, in the terminology I am using, is internally relevant—when its absence renders the account uncriticisable. However, social-ontological theorisation may also be internally relevant for other reasons (marked as "Other Factors?" at "Level A"). Uncriticisability, in turn, results from causal explanatory opacity and possibly from other factors as well (marked as "Other Factors?" at "Level B"). The key question to address now is: what creates causal explanatory opacity in the case of the colonisation thesis? I argue that the opacity in Habermas's account arises from the fact that he may

be positing systems that possess causal powers *qua* systems and systemic mechanisms that operate at a level beyond that of individual social actors, without explaining, in social-ontological terms, how this is so. These two deficiencies in Habermas's account can be generalised into two general sub-criteria for *causal explanatory opacity* (CEO):

> **CEO 1.** The positing of entities higher than human individuals and the ascription of causal powers to such entities, or the use of language that might reasonably be understood as so doing, or

> **CEO 2.** The positing of mechanisms or processes that operate at a level higher than that of human individuals, not in an aggregative sense, or the use of language that might reasonably be understood as so doing, without a clear and justified social-ontological framework.

CEO 1 and *CEO 2* can be understood as synonymous, as in critical realist ontology, where mechanisms are defined as "the ways of acting of things" (Bhaskar 2008, 3), but they are not necessarily synonymous. As sub-criteria for causal explanatory opacity, *CEO 1* and *CEO 2* are not necessarily the only conditions that could, if at least one of them applies, result in causal explanatory opacity. Other conditions may also contribute to this opacity. With these additions, the diagram presented above (Figure 1) would be modified accordingly as shown in Figure 2.

7.   CONCLUSION

This article has critically examined the dialogue between the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and work within the broader field of social ontology. The aim was not to question whether such a dialogue can be fruitful for critical theory—recent scholarship suggests that it can—but rather to assess whether critical theorists have a theoretical obligation to engage in detailed social-ontological theorisation when conducting critical theoretical work. This question arises because, in engaging in social critique, critical theory necessarily makes a number of social-ontological commitments. I have argued that while critical theorists may, at times, need to engage in social-ontological theorisation, this obligation must be subordinated to the aims of critical theory itself. Only when the absence of social-ontological theorisation jeopardises these aims—that is, only when critical theory cannot function without a social ontology—does it become a theoretical necessity.
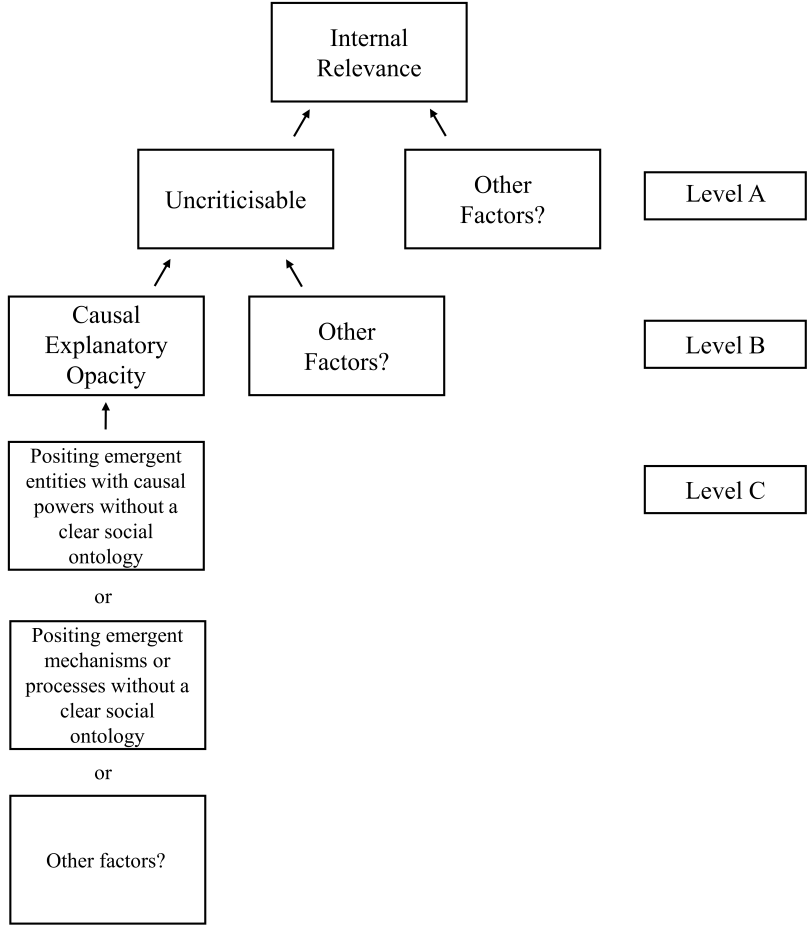
Figure 2. Expanded Criteria for Causal Explanatory Opacity (CEO)
Source: Author's own illustration

Following this argument, I examined Habermas's colonisation thesis and its supporting theses. I argued that we can distinguish between two sets of social-ontological questions related to the colonisation thesis. The first set, while philosophically interesting, may not contribute to the thesis itself; these, I contended, need not be raised or answered by those advancing the colonisation thesis. The second set of questions, however, are internally warranted by Habermas's own account. I argued that failing to seriously engage with this second set renders the causal explanation of the colonisation thesis and its ancillary theses opaque, thereby making Habermas's account partially

uncriticisable.

This article does not provide a definitive answer to the question of when critical theory must engage in social-ontological theorisation. Rather, it demonstrates that no such theoretical obligation exists in general and, through an examination of the colonisation thesis, that such an obligation arises—though not necessarily exclusively—when the absence of social ontology renders an account causally opaque and, consequently, partially uncriticisable. This question requires further reflection through an analysis of other critical theorists' work to determine when and how social-ontological theorisation should be integrated into critical theory.

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