



U N I V E R S I D A D
COMPLUTENSE
M A D R I D



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CRITICAL THEORY AND REASON

Sala Ortega y Gasset (Seminario 217)

Faculty of Philosophy

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

05–06 March 2024

Website: <https://ucm.es/criticaltheoryandreason>

Email: criticaltheoryandreason@ucm.es

Organizers: Emma Ingala, Cillian Ó Fathaigh, and Gavin Rae

Funding: This conference forms part of the activities for the following projects: (1) “The Politics of Reason” (PID2020–117386GA–I00; 2021–2025), financed by the Ministry of Science and Innovation, Government of Spain; and (2) “The Crossroads of the Sexed Body: Cultural Matter and Material Cultures of Sexuality,” (PR27/21-020; 2022–2024), financed by the Government of the Region of Madrid, as part of the multi-year agreement with the Universidad Complutense de Madrid: V PRICIT Regional Plan for Scientific Investigation and Technological Innovation.



**Comunidad
de Madrid**



GOBIERNO
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO
DE CIENCIA
E INNOVACIÓN



UNIVERSIDAD
COMPLUTENSE
MADRID



ABSTRACTS (alphabetical order)

Critique and Gastronomy: Notes for an Analogical Realism

Valeria Campos-Salvaterra (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile)

In a 2015 interview, the American philosopher Graham Harman states that “Gastronomic or wine critique is the true model of philosophy, since it implies approaching objects in a metaphorical and indirect way.” This statement is given in the context of his Object-Oriented Ontology (O.O.O), one of the variants of the contemporary “speculative turn” of philosophy, which aims to carry out “a critique of critique” in pursuit of new and more complex forms of materialism and realism. My question regarding this *critique of critique* relates to the extent to which they incur a critical deflationism entailing a total reduction of epistemic-critical questions to an ontological, factual dimension of explanation—and in some cases, also a reduction of ontology to politics. Deflationism that could border on a perhaps dangerous *cognophobia*, as Ray Brassier points out (2011). Certainly, this liquidation of the epistemological-critical question –i.e. how knowledge or enunciation is possible—is also the threat of dogmatism, for both Kantian tradition of critique engaged in Phenomenology, and for Marxist legacy received by the School of Frankfurt. To address this problem, I’ll present some key arguments of Meillassoux’s anti-correlationist proposal in articulation with some of Harman’s postulates on O.O.O, to show how they themselves take in account the critical problem described above and solve it through a new conception of form and of formalism—actually in tension with some aspects of contemporary materialism. I state that this new conception of form must be grounded in a theory of speculative metaphoricity or transcendental figuration, such as that which medieval and modern philosophers coin in relation with the Aristotelian notion of analogy. This proposal is present in the work of Jacques Derrida and, in a closer relation with new realisms such as those proposed by Gilbert Simondon, but not sufficiently developed by Meillassoux or Harman. I will analyze and isolate the key points that lead to an epistemo-critical focus based on analogical operations to reveal the relation between critique and gastronomy.

What Exactly is Globalised in Globalising Critical Theory?

Tamara Caraus (University of Lisbon, Portugal)

A century after its emergence as a praxis of *Sozialforschung*, as was the original aspiration of the Frankfurt School, Critical Theory is a major component of contemporary thought, widely taught in the humanities and social sciences. However, during recent academic and political debates on post- and de-colonialism several supposed certainties of Frankfurt School Critical Theory have been fundamentally challenged, and Critical Theory itself has become suspected of Eurocentrism and colonialism. Famously, Edward Said considered Frankfurt School Critical Theory, “stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire,” and some have argued from post-colonial and decolonial perspectives for the need to decolonize the Critical Theory itself. On the occasion of its 100th anniversary, the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research acknowledged the challenge and declared the aim of “globalising Critical Theory” part of its new agenda. But what exactly is globalised in globalising Critical Theory? Is there a core of Critical Theory that can be globalised, and if so, is the very gesture of globalising it free from a new colonizing intent? Furthermore, why are not the requests to free



Comunidad
de Madrid





U N I V E R S I D A D
COMPLUTENSE
M A D R I D



Critical Theory from the European/Eurocentric confines in order to be practiced in different contexts a new voluntary (self)re-colonisation? Could Critical Theory be contested without using the very instruments and methods provided by this approach? Subscribing to the aim of decolonising Critical Theory, this presentation attempts to answer the questions above by advancing and defending two premises: First, the possibility of an adequate and timely Critical Theory depends upon envisioning society as world society (that is, not a local or national one), and by acknowledging interdependencies of/in the whole world. Critique cannot stop at the geographical, political, or national borders without undermining itself as critique; it must question the very formation of these boundaries. In this way, Critical Theory can address both the world-historical processes of dispossession and appropriation as central to the emergence and development of modernity and the global dimension of the current challenges (migration, climate change, inequality, etc.). Second, Critical Theory has to be practiced at different points in the context of world society, both by the former colonised and colonisers. This requires envisioning critique as the “ultimate universal,” that is, a capacity equally possessed by everyone for contestation, disruption, and questioning the given, on which a Critical Theory can be built. Otherwise, globalising Critical Theory may presuppose that it provides conceptual tools by means of which both to name the problem and to gain distance from oppressive western/Eurocentric categories of thought, but by doing so, it colonises the whole (theoretical) world once again, this time through critique. The capacity for disruption can be manifested or performed by a question, by a refusal, or even by a stubborn silence and other manifestations, which could be a pre-requisite for a building a Critical Theory. The concluding remarks examine the connection between reason and critique as two building blocks of a Critical Theory, and show that critique, as the “ultimate universal,” precedes reason (which can be less universal); even more, it is critique that determines the process of reasoning as a response to the challenge posited by the disturbance that comes from the universal capacity of disturbing.

Anarchism, Indigeneity, and Reason: Louise Michel’s Construction of Radical Pedagogy

Carolyn J. Eichner (University of Wisconsin: Milwaukee, USA)

In 1890, the revolutionary anarchist feminist Louise Michel left Paris for London, fleeing relentless police harassment. The renowned veteran of France’s 1871 revolutionary civil war known as the Paris Commune, Michel was a police target because of her history and her ongoing efforts to instigate another uprising. Trained as a teacher in the liberal Enlightenment tradition, Michel had subsequently developed a radical anarchist pedagogy based on her educational work in France and in New Caledonia, where she had been exiled to France’s South Pacific penal colony in the wake of the Paris Commune. In London, Michel joined the community of international anarchist exiles. She opened an International School, teaching the children of local and international anarchists, where she put her long-developing radical pedagogy into practice. Michel’s institution eschewed traditional hierarchies and pedagogical approaches. It minimized structure, formality, and discipline, and instead emphasized creativity, children’s particular interests, and liberty. Michel’s revolutionary anarchism was influenced by Enlightenment positivism. She believed in reason, science, and progress. The school’s logo featured an elaborately illustrated image of “a woman wearing a Liberty Cap and lighting her lamp from the sun of Truth with one hand, while feeding children the fruits of knowledge with the other.” The Liberty Cap represented the French Revolution, the sun of Truth signified Enlightenment



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





UNIVERSIDAD
COMPLUTENSE
MADRID



rationality, and the fruits of knowledge denoted the classical world. It displayed a historically rooted rational, yet revolutionary, image. Michel intended her school to revolutionize education. Michel developed an “integral education,” engaging the child’s mind, body, and morality. In New Caledonia, Michel had embraced aspects of Indigenous Kanak culture. She integrated elements of her interpretation of Kanak knowledge, community, and relationships to nature into her pedagogy. Her International School enabled her to combine theory and praxis, developing an anarchist pedagogy at the intersections of science, Enlightenment rationality, anti-authoritarianism, feminism, and Indigenous ways of knowing.

Which Way, Computational Singularity?

Kennan Ferguson (University of Wisconsin: Milwaukee, USA)

Among others, the futurist Ray Kurzweil has proposed the imminent approach of the “singularity”: the moment when computational and technological changes begin to beget, in turn, their own improvements. In this period, Kurzweil and other technological utopians insist, humanity will be fundamentally transformed, escaping the limitations of our physical tool kit and our all-too-human brains. Many technological pessimists share this assumption, but for them the results will be disastrous: the end of human control of progress. What, this paper asks, becomes of power, reason, and politics at such a moment? Drawing on posthumanist theory, AI, and network analysis, I trace the potentialities of political engagements that reach beyond the control of human beings and analyze the recurring confidence that such thinkers have in transcendence. The singularity, I conclude, reworks the familiar escape into utopian fantasy, where politics is lifted from human hands into a realm of the irresponsible and the undisputed. It presumes a model of reason and rationality which—once freed from human limitations and errors—unifies, solves, and determines.

On an Unwritten Logic: Horkheimer and the Possibility of Materialist Dialectics

Samuel Ferns (University College Dublin, Ireland)

In 1937, exactly three hundred years after the publication of Descartes’s chief methodological treatise, which had sought to make clear “the method of rightly conducting one’s reason and of seeking truth in the sciences,” there appeared Horkheimer’s reply in the form of “Traditional and Critical Theory”—his own *Discourse on the Critical Method*. Taking Descartes as the model of a “way of knowing” grounded in an impoverished conception of reason and unable reflexively to thematise its own context of sociohistorical genesis and political application, Horkheimer contraposed as an alternative a critical idea of knowledge based on Marx’s critique of political economy. The essay argued that a “critical theory” of this kind embodied a truer idea of reason—in this way anticipating and making possible a rational society—and so could construct itself on the basis of self-conscious, emancipatory reflexivity. Despite its enduring influence and persistent exemplarity, however, it remains the case that Horkheimer’s essay was in essence the pinnacle of a long period of groundwork. In the correspondence of those involved with the Institute of Social Research in the late 1930s, references abound to the true aim of Horkheimer’s labours: a treatise on dialectical logic. The essays of the thirties which followed Horkheimer’s inaugural address—beginning with the diagnostic “Notes on Science and the Crisis” (1932), through such methodological preliminaries as “On the Problem of Truth” (1935) and “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics” (1937), and inclusive of substantive inquiries best represented by “Egoism and



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





U N I V E R S I D A D
COMPLUTENSE
M A D R I D



Freedom Movements: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Epoch” (1936)—aimed to approach from different sides and to prepare the foundations for a foundational account of dialectical logic. With this theory of materialist dialectics in place, the critical theory of society could commence in earnest. And yet, Horkheimer’s projected treatise never came to be, and so there is such a thing as Horkheimer’s unwritten *Dialectical Logic*. In this paper, I would like to reconstruct and reassess this unrealised work in three steps. First, on the basis of a reading of Horkheimer’s writings of the 1930s—principally his published essays and correspondence, but with reference also to material subsequently collected in his *Gesammelte Schriften*—I reconstruct the idea of dialectical rationality at which Horkheimer was aiming. Second, I try to ascertain the reasons—both theoretical and socio-historical—for Horkheimer’s failing to develop in full his dialectical logic. And third, I offer a critique of Horkheimer’s reconstructed logic, in order to ask after the possibility of re-actualising a materialist dialectics as a basis for a theory of reason and of a rational society.

So Very Tired: The Nature and Ethics of Exhaustion

Sacha Golob (King’s College London, England)

It is common to present the contemporary in terms of exhaustion: burntout individuals, exhausted resources, stagnant political traditions. However, the nature of exhaustion itself and its connection to related phenomena such as enervation or stagnation remains unclear. Drawing on the phenomenological tradition, this paper offers a new analysis of exhaustion via distinct forms of overload, fatigue, and consequent insensitivity. I close by examining the dynamics of stagnation specifically. I argue that, in the moral context, stagnation is defined by a rigidity that raises a unique set of challenges.

What Can an Image (of the Body) Do?: Reason, Images, and Materiality

Emma Ingala (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain)

Since Plato, philosophy has been deeply suspicious of images. Linked to mere appearances as opposed to the truthful and unchangeable essences, deceitful, illusory, and superficial, images have more often than not been identified as that which philosophy should overcome, move beyond, or deconstruct. Currently, the rise of the new materialisms and realisms (and more generally the contemporary developments of visual culture, including the use of images in social networks and mass media or the capacity of AI to generate fake pictures and videos) has promoted a new focus on matter and facts that has frequently had the consequence of throwing again, albeit from a different angle, a form of mistrust in images and the power conceded to the imaginary and the symbolic by approaches such as that of poststructuralism and critique. From this perspective, images have been classified as arational if not irrational, closer to bodies and passions than reason but immaterial nevertheless. Through an engagement with Emanuele Coccia’s and Adriana Cavarero’s work on images and bodies, this paper aims to rethink the status of images, their materiality and their contribution to the constitution of a specific form of political reason.



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





UNIVERSIDAD
COMPLUTENSE
MADRID



“The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters”: Monstrous doubles in Sarah Kofman’s “Vautour Rouge”

Eve Judah (University of Cambridge, England)

Plate 43 of Goya’s *Caprichos* portrays a man asleep at his desk, slumbering over his pens and papers. Monsters surge above him—bats, owls, cats, a lynx—and beneath the frame, there is an inscription, which is now well-known: “*Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the mother of all arts and the source of their wonders.*” Goya is suggesting something other than the Enlightenment trope of the superiority of reason over the imagination. Instead, he seems to suggest that there exists between reason and imagination a certain unity or a duality or difference within reason itself. Goya invites us to ask: are monsters other than reason? Or is the monstrous a way of thinking reflexively about the arts, and by extension, about philosophy? Taking the sketch as its hook and paradigm, this paper will examine the figure of the monster in the work of post-structuralist French philosopher Sarah Kofman. More specifically, this paper will hone in on the figure(s) of the diabolical double in “Vautour Rouge,” a text written in 1975 for *Mimesis desarticulations* (sic), an experimental collective piece co-signed by Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and others. Monstrous doubles have a number of functions in Kofman’s thought, for example as instances of the uncanny or as figures of sexual difference. However, taking its cue from a suggestion put forward in “Vautour Rouge,” this paper will attempt to read the double through the lens of Girardian mimetic rivalry, examining themes of cannibalism, mutual devouring and unnatural reversals. This brings us to this paper’s core contention, which is that monstrous doubles in Kofman’s work are symbols of a kind of dialectic interplay or mimetic rivalry between reason and the imagination. Kofman shows that reason is always already deformed by mimesis, and that imagination in turn is productive of philosophical reasoning. (In contrast to Goya, for whom the imagination must be applied to reason.) Moreover, this understanding of mimetic rivalry also provides us with a model by which to characterise Kofman’s style, her typical blend of metaphor and argumentation. In sum, this paper presents important research in two key ways. Firstly, it contributes to the rehabilitation of Sarah Kofman as a central figure of contemporary French thought, from an entirely new critical perspective. Secondly, and relatedly, it shows that Kofman’s monstrous thinking extends and deepens poststructuralist critiques of reason and the logic of identity.

The Reason to Come: Derrida and Plato on the Future of Reasoning

Jack Kelleher (King’s College London, England)

This paper explores the relation between deconstruction and reason. In it, I analyse Jacques Derrida’s notion of a “reason to come” as outlined in *Rogues*. I contend that the notion of a “reason to come” is best elucidated by expanding upon Derrida’s reflections on the Greek term hypothesis. In order to contextualise Derrida’s remarks, I shall propose an interpretation of the term hypothesis in Plato’s *Republic*. I shall show how Plato distinguishes between two types of reasoning in this text. These two types of reasoning take their grounding from two different types of hypothesis. The first kind of reasoning does not investigate first principles: instead, it proceeds from hypotheses (like the mathematical axioms) to a conclusion. Plato is critical of this kind of reasoning: for it cannot elucidate the axioms that it nevertheless uses. What is more, it uses visible or drawn figures to reach its conclusions, instead of the ideas or Forms signified by these figures.



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





U N I V E R S I D A D
COMPLUTENSE
M A D R I D



The second type of reasoning, on the other hand, proceeds by means of “real” hypotheses in order to arrive at the “anhypothetical first principle of everything.” It does not use drawn figures, but proceeds by means of the Forms themselves. Plato identifies this type of reasoning with dialectic. Plato would have us believe that the second type of hypothesis is separate from and superior to the first. Dialectic would thus be separate from and superior to the mathematical sciences. But another configuration of their relationship is always possible. On my reading, dialectical reasoning is only conceivable in terms of its difference from its mathematical counterpart. The latter would thus be the condition of the former. This reading of the *Republic* enables us to see why Derrida hypothesized that “[t]he rationality of reason is forever destined, and universally so ... to contend between, on the one hand, all these figures and conditions of the hypothetical, and, on the other hand, the absolute sovereignty of the anhypothetical, of the unconditional or absolute principle.” For Derrida, there will always be at least two different types of reasoning. But my reading of hypothesis also points towards a third type of “reason to come.” This “bastard” type of reasoning—deconstruction—would reveal the grounds upon which both types of reasoning were constructed without being reducible to either of them.

The Last Katechon: The Role of Critical Intellectuals in the Post-Industrial Society

Justas Patkauskas (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy)

Recent calamities, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian war against Ukraine, and the impending anthropogenic climate disaster, have posed significant challenges for Western critical intellectuals. Some have publicly resisted vaccination, others have supported violent expansionism, and several have embraced previously discredited ideas such as animism and panpsychism. At the same time, others have abandoned the critical position by advocating state control, technocratic science, and a security-oriented global order. In short, the contemporary landscape of social, political, and economic grievances has confounded even the most diligent and celebrated critical intellectuals, who have struggled to maintain coherent positions while navigating this complex terrain. Therefore, it is justifiable to assert that the role of critical intellectuals, which entails speaking truth to power based on superior knowledge and analytical capacity, may be failing. However, the causes are structural rather than personal. The abundance of information, the complexity of the issues at hand, and the diverse range of topics that must be considered in real-time through social media and the 24-hour news cycle suggest that the expectations for public intellectuals inherited from the Enlightenment era may be unrealistic in the twenty-first century. The situation is further compounded by new forms of ignorance and information warfare produced by the increasing prevalence of social media frameworks, algorithm-based platforms, and artificial intelligence-generated content. In my paper, I propose to consider the status of critical intellectuals from the perspective of historical epistemology, which investigates the conditions and developments of knowledge production. More specifically, I will explore the changing role of critical intellectuals in the post-industrial society using the concept of the katechon, considered by theorists such as Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and Massimo Cacciari. My overall argument will be that within the rationality of the industrial society, critical intellectuals occupied the secularized position of the katechon to supposedly reveal the rational society to itself and detain its worst catastrophes. In post-industrial, post-capitalist, and post-materialist societies, this “katechonic” role of the critical intellectual is no longer possible because, as Theodor W. Adorno argued, the post-capitalist society is not amenable to rational



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





U N I V E R S I D A D
COMPLUTENSE
M A D R I D



exposition. As a result, a specific version of the critical intellectual as the one who reveals the truth of the rational society has become impossible. I conclude with a question: Is a different kind of critical intellectual possible within a “post-rational” society, or are we witnessing the sunset of grand critical theory along with the transformation of the capitalist, industrial society?

Political Reason and Imagination: Connecting Political Rationality and Political Imaginaries

Mattias Lehtinen (University of Helsinki, Finland)

The question of what exactly constitutes the conditions for exercising political reason is a central, albeit often implicit theme which has been raised by a range of thinkers from Foucauldian and Arendtian schools of thought to critical theorists from different perspectives (such as by Rainer Forst and Alena Azmanova). These thinkers have proposed perspectives which underscore for example the presence of power relations (Foucauldians), a shared world (Arendtians), justificatory narratives (Forst) or critical deliberative judgment (Azmanova) in order for political reason to be effective in exercising political judgment in social settings. In this presentation I approach the question of what the background conditions for exercising political reason are, by building on the thought of the theorist of the social imaginary, Cornelius Castoriadis (a founding member of the Socialisme or Barbary group) and by combining Castoriadis' thought with the emerging theoretical field engaging the question of the political imaginary. By turning to Castoriadis' thought, I build an understanding of political rationality as a praxis which requires the presence of a political imaginary, outlining both a normative horizon but also an onto-epistemic shared environment, in order to function. In the first part of the presentation I outline how Castoriadis, by a critical engagement with Kant and Weber, subordinates rationality to imagination. In the second part of the presentation I situate the emerging picture of rationality as based on imagination in relation to his conception of the social imaginary in order to show how the exercise of rationality requires the presence of a collective imaginary. In the third and final part of the presentation, I link the question explicitly to that of the political imaginary and argue for understanding political rationality as a form of praxis which is operative when there is a setting where shared political imaginaries are present which guide the way people understand the political world.

Deconstruction and Ethnocentrism: On Derrida's Generalized Writing

Ramón Macho (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain)

This paper critically examines Jacques Derrida's critique of ethnocentrism, particularly as it pertains to Claude Lévi-Strauss's ethnocentrism, in *On Grammatology*. Specifically, the focus is on whether Derrida's own critique may inadvertently fall into the trap of ethnocentrism. The central argument posits that Derrida hastily attributes a generalized concept of writing to the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, a concept deeply rooted in Western philosophical tradition. I suggest that it would have been necessary to validate the concept of writing beyond its Western origins before discussing its supposed generalization. My exposition underscores the importance of contextualizing philosophical concepts within their cultural and historical settings and highlights the potential pitfalls of imposing Western frameworks on non-literacy traditions. By reevaluating Derrida's critique in the light of Amazonian indigenous perspectives, it contributes



**Comunidad
de Madrid**



GOBIERNO
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO
DE CIENCIA
E INNOVACIÓN



U N I V E R S I D A D
COMPLUTENSE
M A D R I D



to the ongoing discourse on decolonizing critical theory and broadening our understanding of reason in a global context.

Is there a Materiality to Reason?

James R. Martel (San Francisco State University, USA)

In this paper, I will explore whether we can consider reason to have a material form, and, if so, how that would affect the way we think about it as well as its value for the purposes of politics. Normally (that is to say within the orthodoxy of European and Western thought) reason is considered to be entirely disembodied and therefore somehow above the fray of material influence. In this way, reason plays a big role in the formation of what I like to call “archism,” namely a form of power that is based on hierarchy and the projection of authority onto externalities like God or nature. Archism is so ubiquitous that it generally pretends not to have a name (hence the value of calling it something). Reason is one of the key vehicles by which this projection occurs. Seeming to access as it does some kinds of higher power or truth, reason is a way to discern what externalities demand in terms of an earthly politics. In fact this is only a form of bad immanentism wherein the desires of the archons are projected outwards and then received “back” as a way to assert that existing forms of domination are not only benign but also in accord with universal truths. But if we can take reason “down to earth,” as it were, and consider it in its material form, then all of these claims for accessing truth are dissipated and undermined. To think about a material reason, I will engage with thinkers like Spinoza but also even Kant, who I will show often inadvertently reveals a material side to reason. This other reason, is radical and anarchic even as traditional understandings of reason are dogmatic and archist. I will also turn to the work of Samantha Frost whose reading of Hobbes indicates the way that reason is both material and at the same time (I would even go so far as to say and therefore) free.

Critical Theory and Affect: Adorno’s Concept of Touch

Cristina Matei (Goldsmith’s College, England)

Among the numerous lines of thinking pursued by Adorno over the course of his philosophical activity, the question of touch seems to hold a place of its own. The contextual background across which the problem of touch develops is traditionally constituted by a series of gestures increasingly saturated with male fantasies of objectivity ranging from the separation of the mind from the body hitherto central to the construction of a rationally oriented, philosophical discourse, to the sheer absence of a feminine index, alarmingly encouraging the production and reproduction of a gendered type of rhetoric. Responsible for holding open the mind/body distinction is the principle of separation coated with the authority of formal abstraction. From Plato’s gap between essences and appearances, to the Cartesian divorce of *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*, to the Kantian division between form and content, to Heidegger’s priority of being over beings, a fascination with the disembodied mind has relegated the living body and its feelings to an inferior position. Adorno, however, rehearsed and practiced across his critical theory a modality of reason informed by tactile perception. His insight recognized at the core of the bodily experience of touch a force of resistance against instrumental rationality—the fully developed mechanism of domination permanently reproducing itself in advanced capitalist societies. The current paper explores Adorno’s gesturally developed, yet crucial concept of touch as an alternative for the philosophies predominant across the Western tradition that have undertheorized the material body



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





U N I V E R S I D A D
C O M P L U T E N S E
M A D R I D



in their blind pursuit of reason. Adorno's subtle and implicit theoretical discourses on the nature of touch come forth as a corrective for those chapters forming the genealogy of reason that fail to grasp sensibility's dialectically complex and sometimes contradictory character. By reading Adorno's quasi-sensuous, quasi-logical mode of tactility as a form of a reaction against a predominantly intellectualist brand of philosophy that glosses reason as masculine and affect as feminine, the present paper represents an attempt to answer the following dilemma: how can critical thinking develop a certain kind of tactile acuity capable of touching that which is untouchable in an approach that is at once cautious, nonviolent and affective, in such a way that it can begin to recognize that which has for so long been disparaged as deceptive by rationalist philosophy: the unclear and indistinct perceptions?

“From Nom to Nomos”: the Name as Institution in Derrida.

Cillian Ó Fathaigh (King's College London, England).

Be that the name of a concept or of an author, the name has a privileged position in Derrida's work. This paper considers the role of the name in Derrida's philosophy, placing it in the context of recent work on institutions in Derrida's thought. I argue that the name functions as a form of institution for Derrida and that his engagement with names reflects his broader attitude towards institutions. The first part of this paper traces his different engagements with names, focussing on three key moments: the paleonymic description of deconstruction (“Signature, evènement, context”); the link between address, prayer and the name (Sauf le nom); and, his frequent recourse to the phrase “in the name of” (*au nom de*) in his political engagements. I will argue that there is a shift in his relationship to the name throughout his work; in his earlier work, Derrida presents his relationship to the name as strategic, with his later work emphasising a transcendental dimension. In the second part, I turn a specific name: democracy. Addressing debates around the privileging of democracy in Derrida's work (Haddad, Hägglund), I will argue that there is indeed a reason for this privilege: the relationship that democracy has to the name. Finally, I consider literature as a name. I propose that this can shift from the name to naming, and in particular the potential for inventing new names. I argue that this justifies Derrida's privileging of literature (as the right to say anything), but also consider the hesitancy Derrida has towards new names and how this reflects broader limits in his account of institutions.

From Formal-Technical Rationality to Democratic Rationalization: Critical Theory of Technology in Marcuse and Feenberg

Antonio Oraldi (University of Lisbon, Portugal)

This presentation delves into the critique of formal-technical rationality as expounded by Herbert Marcuse (1964), a foundational figure in critical theory, and traces the implications of his analysis for contemporary discussions on alternative rationalities, particularly in the work of Andrew Feenberg. As a former student of Marcuse, Feenberg's influential contributions in critical theory of technology can be traced to the critique of technical rationality. The presentation will start by noting similarities between the two authors in connecting the concepts of rationality and critique to the question of technology. Thus, contrary to most other critical theorists, both Marcuse and Feenberg develop a specific critical theory of technology. Their critique of technology in late capitalist conditions is informed by a critique of the supposed neutrality of its formal or technical rationality. As a counterstrategy, both theories envision positive social transformation in terms of



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





UNIVERSIDAD
COMPLUTENSE
MADRID



the affirmation of an alternative rationality. The concept of rationality thus remains key for critical interrogation and emancipatory re-orientations of society. Given the relevance of technology in modern society and its being a site of power relations, both Marcuse and Feenberg conceive of such emancipation as linked to an “alternative technology”, which expresses an alternative rationality. At this point, the two authors take a different route. In Marcuse, the alternative rationality aims to reconcile Logos with Eros, and his concept of a “technology of liberation” ultimately remains tied to the ambiguities of utopian projects (1967; 1969). On the other hand, Feenberg develops the concept of an alternative rationality in a more grounded way, so as to include both a plurality of historicities and modernities and, crucially, a democratization of technology (1995). Drawing from Feenberg’s works (1999, 2017) and secondary literature on the topic (Cressman, 2022), the last part of the presentation explores the relationship between technology and democracy. The democratization process is grounded on what he calls a “democratic rationalization,” whereby “democratic interventions” in technology design and production are the norm, not the exception, of a democratic society. The critical assessment of Feenberg’s proposal will show (a) the interconnection between a democratized technology and a truly democratic democracy in the digital age, (b) the power of a democratized technology to counterbalance the hegemonic-ideological nature of formal-technical rationality, but also (c) the limits of the project of democratic technical reason when democracy is conceived merely as participation.

The Task of Critical Social Theory in Technological Innovation Processes

Lisann Penttilä (KU Leuven, Belgium)

Not only is technology intertwined with everyday life, but technological innovations are often viewed as the only solution to pressing societal problems. This trend can be seen in the extensive funding programs by major institutions and organizations such as the European Commission’s Horizon Europe program and investment groups such as Breakthrough Energy (founded by Bill Gates). The messaging is clear: we need to invest quickly and innovate even quicker. This immediately raises several questions concerning responsibility, specifically in the context of ensuring that the needs and concerns of social actors are heard and incorporated into the technological innovation process. In this presentation, my focus will be on the responsibility to identify and incorporate social critique into the innovation process. To do so, I first engage with the work of French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, as well as Michel de Certeau to develop an understanding of who critiques and how. This is important for our development of a broad conception of critique i.e., a conception not limited to the theorist. Second, I start a dialogue with one of Herbert Marcuse’s most celebrated students, Andrew Feenberg. His lifelong work has culminated in what he calls his critical constructivist approach, which shows that social actors can intervene in technical systems and successfully change them (e.g., efforts of feminist movements and environmental movements). By showing this, Feenberg is able to empirically support his challenge to neutral and deterministic conceptions of technologies precisely by showing that social intervention can succeed in creating new technical possibilities, and more specifically, ones that take into account a broader range of interests. Yet what about the hindrances to these forms of intervention? In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse says that one of the most perplexing aspects of advanced industrial society is the rational character of its irrationality. It is this rational character of technical systems that make alternatives seem impossible, if not



**Comunidad
de Madrid**



GOBIERNO
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO
DE CIENCIA
E INNOVACIÓN



UNIVERSIDAD
COMPLUTENSE
MADRID



invisible. This links closely with the underlying assumptions of Feenberg's conception of formal bias, which is a bias that is rational. According to Feenberg, formal bias is incorporated into technical systems and designs by specific choices that favor one alternative over others. Actors within technical systems or users of technical devices may perpetuate the original bias, even if they have no such intention. The goal of this presentation is therefore to unpack how formal bias can be addressed by means of social critique, which I take to be essential to the task of critical social theory today.

The Dialectic of Enlightenment and Freudian Drive Theory: The Irrational Ground of Reason and Political Agency

Gavin Rae (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain)

Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment has occupied a central role in both the works of the so-called Frankfurt School and, to a less explicit degree, critical theory more broadly understood. They demonstrate how enlightenment reason arose from the experience of myth, before arguing that enlightenment reason itself depends both upon certain myths and the structures of irrationality and power that it claims to have superseded. In short, the irrationality of myth fosters enlightenment, which, despite itself, continues to be inherently mythic and so irrational. The question that arises however refers to whether and how the liberatory promise of emancipation and reason constitutive of reason and critical theory can be maintained in the face of their diagnosis of the dialectic of enlightenment. One strand, manifested most famously by Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and György Lukács, maintains that Adorno and Horkheimer have driven themselves and us into a dead political end: by associating reason with instrumentality and working with a binary reason/irrationality (i.e. myth) opposition, they can only overcome the former by appealing to myth, which reinstantiates the dialectic of enlightenment that, on their telling, can only logically lead to the political domination of instrumental rationality to be overcome. The purpose of this paper, however, is to call into question that conclusion by arguing that it not only misunderstands the nature of the "dialectic" inherent in Adorno and Horkheimer's critique, but also fails to appreciate the fundamental, albeit implicit, role that Freud's drive theory plays in Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of political agency. To do so, I first outline the basic problem of Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment paying attention to the argument that it leads to a political dead end. I then tie Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis to Freudian psychoanalysis, which provides the justification for my argument regarding the importance of a particular socio-historical version of drive theory for their analysis, before turning to the questions of the relationship between reason and irrationality and reason, irrationality, and political agency. The aim is to both correct a longstanding critique of the dialectic of enlightenment and argue, from that amendment, that their dialectic offers a particularly sophisticated understanding that undermines any reason/unreason binary opposition to insist upon reason's entwinement with the irrational; an entwinement that ensures that politics and political agency are not fundamentally rational pursuits nor do they entail the overcoming of unreason but are instead activated by and so depend upon, without being determined by, the irrational.



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





U N I V E R S I D A D
COMPLUTENSE
M A D R I D



Post-Truth Populism and the Enjoyment of Not-Knowing

Hannah Richter (University of Sussex, England)

Much of the scholarship that engages with the recent surge of right-wing authoritarianism views the appeal of populism and the rise of post-factual political content as two important but largely independent markers of the former. Those who do link both phenomena rarely make a strong case for why both should be explored together. This paper argues that Jacques Lacan's theory of enjoyment (*jouissance*) can be used to make such a case. It can thereby, it is suggested, advance our understanding of "post-truth populism" as a social phenomenon. In Lacan, enjoyment is the motor of a subjective striving that seeks, but must always fail, to repair the subject's epistemic severance from the Real. The analytical use of enjoyment as "a political factor," in particular to understand the rise of the populist right, is not unprecedented. Scholars including Slavoj Žižek and Todd McGowan have drawn on enjoyment to explore prevalent xenophobia and racism as the violent turn against an Other perceived to have stolen enjoyment, hate speech and excessive misogyny as enjoyable transgressions and the populist lure as rooted in the enjoyment of a lacking belonging. Building on, but moving beyond these insights, this paper explores the appeal of conspiracy theories, anti-expert stances and (obviously) fabricated news stories via Lacan's enjoyment. Post-truth politics is unpacked as rooted in an enjoyment of not-knowing that responds to the anxiety-inducing loss of being able to know the world. The symbolic crises of the present, importantly globalisation, climate change and technological acceleration mean that today's subjects not only perceive themselves as severed from the world, but also from the possibility of rationally developing reasonably secure knowledge about it. The paper suggests that the end of the rational will to know is overcome via the repetition of this loss in the excessive enjoyment of not-knowing: rejecting information as "fake news," consuming misinformation and endorsing conspiracy theories. Against this background, the paper re-interprets the post-truth populist enjoyment derived from xenophobic, sexist or homophobic excess. It argues that the former is not only the product of displacing lost enjoyment to social Others. It also marks the enjoyable repetition of social categories and lines of demarcation which have lost their value for producing knowledge about the world.

Hope beyond the Anthropocene: From Denialist Optimism to Affirmative Pessimism

Liesbeth Schoonheim (Humboldt University, Germany)

How to think about care for a world when confronted with its demise due to climate change? Not surprisingly, this question raises the issue of "hope" at the world's survival, which has been central to political-theoretical debates on the Anthropocene (Morton 2013; Thaler 2023; Gibson, Rose, and Fincher 2015; Head 2016). In this paper, I want to take issue with a common-sense notion of hope (as a necessary requirement to be moved into political action) and instead set up a dialogue between a variety of authors who complicate the relationship between hope and care through a critique of instrumental reason: scholars in feminist science and technology studies (Haraway, Stenger, Depret, Le Guin), post-colonial and Black feminist thinkers (Ferdinand, Yusoff, Povinelli, Da Silva), as well as approaches loosely drawing on Hannah Arendt. These approaches share a notion of care for the world that is rooted in despair over its survival. While "hope" and "despair" are strictly speaking antonyms, they are, I argue, in fact closely related. It is only under fear for the pending destruction of our (and many other) worlds, that we start to look



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





U N I V E R S I D A D
C O M P L U T E N S E
M A D R I D



for glimmers of hope. Importantly, this concept of hope presupposes a critique of instrumental reason as a typically western, masculine manner of domination of the earth, without completely doing away with scientific or technological knowledge. Among those who acknowledge the existential threat of climate change, I argue that the despair at the worlds' survival can give rise to two forms of hope: either one that I call “denialist optimism,” which I articulate through a critique of the notion of the Anthropocene and which presupposes a linear temporality; or one that I call ‘affirmative pessimism’ and that breaks with this linearity, and folds back on itself, showing how the catastrophe is not only a future event but also always already happening (or what Elizabeth Povinelli calls the “ancestral catastrophe”). Each is exemplified in a specific way of storytelling: the first, by positing a sovereign, singular Man who is the main hero of a story; and the second, by presupposing a plurality of protagonists in a variety of relations (of which some can but do not have to be conflictual). Finally, in the conclusion, I suggest that denialist optimism presupposes a form of care that is more likely to succumb to paternalism (Tronto 1993), while affirmative hope is less likely to do so.

Decolonial Rationality as Creating Relationality

Friso Timmenga (University of Groningen, Holland)

This paper argues that decolonizing philosophy requires a new understanding of rationality that is both relational and creative. It has been argued that coloniality is in essence the negation of relationality (Serequeberhan, 2015). In terms of time, for example, the modern/colonial narrative insists on a sharp historical discontinuity with the Middle Ages (Mignolo, 2007). In epistemological sense, it demands a sharp separation from the knower and the known (Kirloskar-Steinbach and Kalmanson, 2021). It has therefore been argued that Western ontology is exclusively capable of thinking isolated entities, rather than relations (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). At the same time, decolonizing knowledge does not mean de-rationalizing knowledge. As Kwasi Wiredu (1980) points out, this would only play into the racist trope that rationality is something uniquely European. Despite the fact, then, that inspiration for relational knowing can be found abundantly in the mystic tradition (Yountae, 2017), this paper calls attention to the fact that rational knowledge is capable of think relationally on its own. This, however, requires an entirely different concept of rationality (Mbembe 2015). In order to provide a first sketch in this direction, I will highlight two approaches to rationality; one via the principle of sufficient reason and one via the principle of contradiction. My argument will demonstrate that both approaches emphasize the inherent openness and creativity within rational thinking, rendering rational thought itself capable of transcending oppositional dichotomies. I will therefore conclude that rationality is, in essence, concerned with creating relations, which both leads to and depends on a thinking of openness. Decolonizing philosophy as a discipline, therefore, does not require a de-rationalization of philosophy, but rather presupposes rational thinking as relational thinking.

The Future Stakes of Abyssal Critique

(David Ventura, Newcastle University, England)

Recent years have witnessed calls for a form of critical theory that accounts for the brutal historical experience of transatlantic slavery. Drawing inspiration from Édouard Glissant's (1997) reflections on that experience and recent developments in Black studies (e.g. Sharpe 2016; da Silva 2022), recent studies have argued that critical theory must not only seek to rethink



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





U N I V E R S I D A D
COMPLUTENSE
M A D R I D



subjectivity in terms of what Glissant calls the “abyss” of the Middle Passage (Chandler and Pugh 2023), but must also seek to conceptualise alternative forms of resistance, such as refusal, that aim towards the desedimentation and destruction of “this” world, rather than towards the creation of future worlds and imaginaries (Chandler and Chipato 2023). This paper returns to Glissant, and to two distinctive figurations of refusal in his work (namely, “the silent walker” in *Poetics of Relation* and “the nameless person” who speaks only in the past tense in *The Overseer’s Cabin*), to challenge this latter suggestion that abyssal critique should posit no future orientation. I argue that while these Glissantian refusing figures certainly highlight the political necessity of desedimenting the colonially-scripted world, they also index a unique praxis of temporal resistance that does not separate the task of refusal from the imaginative beckoning of alternative worlds and imaginaries. With such figures of refusal, that is, Glissant (1999) is not only challenging critical theory to think how it might desediment “this” world, but is also prophetically signalling future ways to “live it differently.”

Nature and Freedom: Reconsidering the Materialist Philosophy of Spirit in Dialectic of Enlightenment

Wouter Vijfhuizen (*Pennsylvania State University, USA*).

Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s stance on rationality in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* remains a subject of controversy. Habermas, who remains its most influential interpreter, contends that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* supports a complete rejection of instrumental reason in favor of aesthetics, positioning the latter as the ultimate normative resource for critical theory (Habermas 1998). Re-assessing the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*’s substantial contributions to critical social theory, scholars have begun to challenge Habermas’ view by emphasizing the text’s aspirations to revitalize reason by advancing a self-reflective form of rationality (Sherratt 2000; Herf 2012; Allen 2014; Noppen 2015; Aschheim 2017; Grumley 2019). Aligning with the latter approach, this paper aims to show that appreciating Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s attitude towards reason requires recognizing its broader materialist-philosophical ambitions. To do so, it places Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critical genealogy of reason within a broader context of post-Kantian philosophy, focusing especially on the question of the passage from nature to freedom. I show that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* embraces the nature–freedom transition as the quintessential task of an emancipatory, materialist philosophy. Doing so, it (i) articulates a distinct materialist philosophy of spirit that comprehends the genesis of human freedom out of its natural preconditions, (ii) critiques the hitherto prevalent idealist formations of reason for remaining in bondage to nature, and (iii) offers a self-reflexive critique of enlightenment as the necessary condition for enlightenment to actualize a nature-transcending formation. I argue that appreciating how the distinct materialist philosophy of spirit contained in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* vindicates the liberating potential of reason requires a critical reevaluation of its critical, materialist inheritance of goals of the classical German philosophical tradition. I develop my argument in the following sections. Drawing primarily from Kant and Hegel, the initial part outlines the concept of a philosophy of spirit as an inquiry into the self-liberation of spirit from its natural preconditions. Next, I examine the concepts of nature and enlightenment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, demonstrating that its critique of instrumental reason pertains to the failure of enlightenment to transcend its bondage to nature. Finally, I conclude by highlighting how Adorno and Horkheimer conceive their self-reflective critique of reason as nature-transcending and



**Comunidad
de Madrid**





UNIVERSIDAD
COMPLUTENSE
MADRID



affirming reason's autonomy, thus advancing the deepest commitments of German Idealist philosophy within the framework of an emancipatory materialism.

Informationcritique, between Reason and Desire

Ashley Woodward (University of Dundee, Scotland)

In his 2002 book *Critique of Information*, Scott Lash proposes the term “Informationcritique”—inspired by the German *Ideologiekritik*—to name the critical theory of the information society. I propose to analyse an important transformation in the task of critical social theory of the information society. Twentieth century critiques of the information society tended to focus on *reason*, seeing both information theory and information technologies as expressions of a problematic technocratic rationality. Some followed Adorno and Horkheimer's indictment of instrumental rationality in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they claim that “a technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself.” Those more sanguine about the liberating potentials of reason, following Habermas, nevertheless also saw “technoscience” as a threat to its positive application, and construed information technology as the apogee of this threat. The source of this critical concern with the information society centred on reason was primarily Norbert Wiener's views of society, which he understood on a model of “homeostasis”: stable functioning is the desirable value, and information flow is the means to achieve this stability through efficient communication and control. The cybernetic vision thus gave rise to an image of society controlled by hyper-bureaucratic rationalisation, hard-wired to prevent any instability or significant change. Such a view of information as a mechanism of control is evident in Baudrillard's early works, for example, and received an important expression in Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. In the later, the “informatization” of society brings with it the dominance of “performativity” (efficiency as determined by input/output ratio), and concerns about governments and corporations potentially monopolising access to information. With the twenty-first century, however, we have seen a new dimension of the information society come into focus, which seems almost to be the opposite of the first. This new dimension signals a shift in critical awareness from problems of *reason* to problems of *desire*. While the dreams and fears of information technologies in the twentieth century seemed to circulate around governance and regulation, these technologies have begun to do something quite different, and on a massive scale: they have come to be used for marketing; targeting, cultivating, and exploiting the *desires* of individuals. This sometimes takes place to the benefit of governments, in ways that appear scandalous (e.g. Cambridge Analytica), but frequently it is done for the benefit of the profits of private corporations, and in this way has been largely normalized. This new dimension was taken up by Bernard Stiegler, who developed them through his own theorisations of technics and desire, seeing himself extending the legacy of Adorno and Horkheimer's Critical Theory. After surveying this shift, this paper argues that in order to deal with the new situation, we need *a new critical concept of information itself*, as Stiegler called for in some of his last writings. Many of the current understandings of information construe its essence as either or both technical (syntactic or signaleitic) or epistemic (semantic content). While these capture important aspects of what the social critique of reason focused on, they seem to miss what has become crucial in what information technologies *can do*, that is, manipulate desire. An expanded notion of information is therefore necessary. Resources for developing such a notion exist in twentieth-century philosophers such as Ruyer, Simondon, and Serres, all of whom developed notions of information with ontological, axiological, and pragmatic dimensions. This paper will draw out some of these dimensions, pointing to a “tensorial” or “problematic” notion of information which will give us a better critical purchase on the tensions in the information society, and is more useful for contemporary Informationcritique.



**Comunidad
de Madrid**

