

Towards a “Need to May”: From the Good Life to Political Autonomy in Critical Theory

Lukas Meisner

I

In line with Theodor W. Adorno’s demand in his dedication to Horkheimer at the beginning of *Minima Moralia*, the good life is back even in the Global West (Adorno 1970, 7)—not in lived practice on the whole but at least in the yearnings of theory. In that sense, the good life was at the heart of Frankfurt School’s critical theory from its inception. But what could such a “good life” be about? From within the confines of more recent Critical Theories in Germany, one might claim that the “meta-criteria” of the good life can be found in Jürgen Habermas’ “communication” (Habermas 2019a; 2019b), Axel Honneth’s “recognition” (Honneth 1992), or Hartmut Rosa’s “resonance” (Rosa 2019a). On the other hand, the conceptual broadness if not abstraction of these relational but monist meta-criteria seems to lead into a too undifferentiated neutrality regarding their actual content—by which their critical force is diminished. For example, what about, in the case of Habermas, those team “communications” that get valorised by the “new spirit” of community capitalism after the technologically induced collapse of the dualism between system and lifeworld? Or what about, in the case of Honneth, the “mutual recognition” of lord and slave, of “sado-masochistic” relations (Erich Fromm) within power-laden roles and/or hierarchic institutions—including contemporary lean hierarchies and other imperatives mediated by the newest market moralism? And what about, in the case of Rosa, today’s prefabricated musical architectures and designed landscapes built towards creativity and exchange (“co-working spaces”), drawing profit precisely from luring out “unavailability” (*Unverfügbarkeit*)—exemplarily known from one of Apple’s or Google’s offices?¹

1 In the case of resonance, it also remains questionable how, without normative or political judgement and with mere phenomenological description, a stark opposition can be upheld between “resonance” and “resonance-reification” (Rosa), or between resonating qualities in different rituals or “ornaments of mass” (Siegfried Kracauer)—like between

All in all, it seems that neither communication nor recognition or resonance entail—since they remain too over-generalised if not apolitical concepts—a sufficiently severe intrinsic resistance against being co-opted into the structural violences of the status quo. Consequently, these conceptualisations appear as not unambivalently critical in and of themselves which, however, would be necessary to count as criteria, if not for the good life as such, then at least for a critical theory of the good life. To be clear, this argument does not take away any of the other merits of these approaches. On the contrary, they continue, respectively, to serve as a non-foundationalist foundation for ethics and rationality (Habermas); as proof of the social nature of each individual and of any full-blown understanding of freedom (Honneth); and as a sociology of world- and self-relations beyond all flat ontologies of domination (Rosa). Despite these merits, however, communication, recognition and resonance appear as almost defenceless against their own highly problematic concretisations within the given status quo.

Next to these conceptually too open meta-criteria, not necessarily critical due to their high level of abstraction, there is a more tangible alternative with a clearer set of differentiated features—proposed, for example, in some versions of anthropological perfectionism (Henning 2015). Yet, this less abstract and more tangible alternative is potentially too substantial and thus possibly too narrow for grasping the good life. In which sense? Although we certainly can and should, beyond the strawman of essentialism, and beyond nihilist denialism more generally, develop a categorical framework of what is conducive and what not to (human) flourishing, we cannot, with the help of this framework, fill the concrete utopia of what the good life would be once it was lived for real. That is, whereas anthropological arguments are important already now both to refute the claims of existing powers and to remind us of what we need and who we can be, they should not be confused as representing the utopian potentiality

a happily dancing drugs-permeated flower-power festival and a Dionysian march of fascist *Entbemmung*, to mention just two extreme cases. Arguably, as soon as there is some kind of mystical immersion, it is not just an “echo” that is the felt result but a feeling of the sublime as the encounter with an absolute Other. Even if this Other is a God of xenophobia, the featuring of resonance in its ecstatic vibrations can hardly be denied. If, on the other hand, one claims that in these cases mere affectation is replacing all emotion and thus, resonance disappears, one must equally raise this allegation vis-à-vis other cases that Rosa defends, e.g., regarding a public viewing event surrounding sports festivals, or religious gatherings, say, of communion.

of possible futures. Short of utopian potentiality, however, no "good life" can be conceived either—not only because today's living and goodness are circumscribed to an extreme degree, but because no good life can be lived alone and privatised, and even less amidst despair. Of course, if the good life cannot be lived privately, cut off from society, then it needs a good society to become possible. A theory of the good life in lack of the practices of such a society, therefore, risks conceiving the good too close to the contemporary world as it is. From this viewpoint, both the intrinsic limit and task of critical theory—as it is directed towards the good life—is to be found in its support of emancipatory praxis whose intentional movement transcends the given falseness of the whole. critical theory's task, thus, is not so much to bake the perfect human or to design a list of features of the good life *ex ante* with the ingredients of the problematic present we live in but to support all praxis towards a Beyond in which living beings could live their good lives according to their own deliberations both on the good and on how to live it.

Without thus refuting any of the alleys of contemporary critical theory in Germany we have just sketched out, a complement is needed that can be both critical and non-substantial enough to serve as a criterion for the critique and criticality of critical theory. As such, I am proposing to develop a pre-normative pre-condition of the good life that both affirms the potential of a better future and concretely negates the structural violences of the present. This pre-normative pre-condition is to be found in what I call "political autonomy," which is a form of trans-liberalist autonomy not to be confused with independence or sovereignty. Instead, political autonomy, far from exercising power over the other, is about the shared decision on how we, as the fragile, finite, embodied human creatures we are, would like to live together responsibly as vulnerable earthlings belonging to the diverse bond of life on earth—it is about the How of *Vivir Bien*.

Yet, political autonomy is a precondition of the good life because the goodness of life can only be judged by those beings that live it. If the goodness of life is judged by someone else, this life can no longer be claimed to be good in the sense of those living it. More to the point: even if someone decided to live heteronomously, this decision still had to be taken in an autonomous manner to remain the decision of this person themselves. Hence, arguably, without living beings self-determining their own lives, these lives cannot be said to be "good" according to these living beings at

all. As such, however, political autonomy is not a normative demand but a pre-normative condition.

The theoretical question of the good life and the praxis of substantial democracy, in other words, are interdependent and cannot be treated separately. This separation, however, is what both the substantially anthropological (communitarist) and the formalistically democratic (liberalist) schools in the West reproduce by reinforcing—although from opposite camps—the modern dualism of “private” and “political.” By contrast, political autonomy is (in its union of the private and the political) neither more nor less than the condition of possibility of the good life. As such, political autonomy is both open to other futures and beyond the present status quo. It is both sufficiently non-substantial and critical enough to serve as the criterion for critical theory’s critiques. The latter thesis—that political autonomy is, in and of itself, beyond the current status quo, which is necessary for approaching the good life—is what I will be arguing for in the next pages. To do so, I need to show why the current status quo is to be defined, first and foremost, as capitalist.

II

As pioneers of what I call the critical theory of Political Autonomy—like Herbert Marcuse (1971), Moishe Postone (2003), or Martin Hägglund (2020)—have shown, with the decrease of the realm of necessity in Western modernity, the resulting increase of the realm of freedom is at the same time an increasing realm of expansion, aggression, and acceleration if, and only if, capital is feeding this realm of freedom back into its own realm of “false necessities” (Adorno). By contrast, if that feedback would not take place, the increase in the realm of freedom—as a socially, somatically, and semantically shared realm—could and would amount, rather, to the arrival of the here and now (instead of expansion), to the relaxation of all antagonist energies (instead of aggression) and to the pause of movement (instead of acceleration). Hence, it is not the increase of the realm of freedom as such but, on the contrary, the false necessity of capital which is the force that makes modernity an infinitely expansive, auto-aggressive, and accelerationist age. Political autonomy, then, is needed to reclaim the realm of freedom, that is, this life and our lifetime on earth, back from capital by reclaiming our responsibility from the feedback-loops of capital’s cycles. The most basic demand for good living and the criterion for

the critical theory of Political Autonomy, consequently, is a substantial democratisation of all forms of life, including science, technology, and the economy.

Such political autonomy is also crucial to dealing with our time’s most dangerous trajectory, which is the imminent threat of climate crisis. Whereas human animals’ metabolism with nature is not a choice but a real necessity since humans were, are, and remain natural beings, the way of this metabolism can and does move along very different optional parameters. That is to say that, to realise a non-disposing relation with nature, it is no option not to decide on what these optional parameters should look like. Rather, to be able to realise a more convivial, symbiotic, and peaceful relation with and within nature, we need to accept our responsibility for the way we organise ourselves as a society, including the way we reproduce it and ourselves along with it. This is because as long as it is not us who decide over what and how to (re-)produce, consume, and distribute, it does not follow that no decision is taken at all but, rather, that an artificially fateful force decides these questions without, yet over, us—that force being, since modernity, the logic, structure, and relation of capital.

This is no empty formula. Rather, capital is the globalising logic of value (valorisation), the structure of accumulation (totalisation), and the relation of exploitation (privatisation). It can best be illustrated along its three interrelated divisions: production (1), consumption (2), and distribution (3). Split in this inter-connected manner, “capital” is the name for the societal relationship of:

- 1) Alienated production, meaning a form of producing not for living but for mere survival, or, more correctly, for the maintenance of capital (in the short run and in the microcosm. Of course, in the long run, this producing for survival and maintenance ends in burnout and crisis; and regarding the macrocosm, in political and ecological catastrophes). Since alienated production produces privatised surplus, which is re-invested into exploitation, it produces even more alienation, or continues reproducing alienation on an increasingly higher scale. Hence, alienated production (re-)produces its own vicious cycle—alienation—and is thus alienating (Meisner 2022).
- 2) Fetishised consumption, meaning a form of consuming not in line with one’s own needs but subsumed under the “needs of profit.” Now, since the 20th century at the latest and particularly in the West, capi-

tal—to satisfy its own need to valorise, totalise and privatise further—is in need to alter human needs, mainly by transforming these needs into addictions, or *Bedürfnisse* into *Begehrnisse* (Böhme 2016). The resulting fetishised consumption is usually called “consumerism,” a form of consumption that actually consumes, both physically and mentally, its consumers instead of feeding, breeding, and satisfying them. Towards this omnipresent fetishisation not only of commodities but of the process of consuming itself, the advances of advertisement as the immaterial production of consumerist needs were of major historical importance.

- 3) Reified distribution, meaning a form of distributing that appears as if being endowed with a subjectivity of itself (“invisible hand”). Its valorising, totalising, and privatising movements, then, can only be “contemplated” by its “prosumers” as if they were just its victims and not also those who enact its pseudo-laws (Lukács 2013). As a result, reified distribution distributes not only a reified world (“the market”, the “world of commodities”) but also a reified version of being-in-the-world. This increasingly reifies the world which, thereby, is becoming mere application, instrument, or means (as “property”). Importantly, since there are no human ends in the orienting background but the reified ends of capital, this means-character transforms human beings the more into means the more they transform the world in this instrumentalist manner. Hence, under capitalism, there is a dialectics between objective and subjective reification, or the reification of the being of the world and the reification of being-in-this-world (Meisner 2023).

Capital, in a nutshell, is the valorising logic of value, the totalising structure of accumulation, and the privatising relation of exploitation, consisting in the complex totality of alienated-alienating production, fetishised-fetishising consumption, and reified-reifying distribution. As such, capital is the blind force that pushes a globalising modernity forward on its destructive path by putting the increased realm of freedom into the service of the realm of false necessities—read: of alienation, fetishisation and reification.

III

In that sense, capital is a blind global force that decides over us and the rest of the planet as long as we do not reclaim the responsibility for our own production, distribution and consumption (process), that is, as long as political autonomy does not substantially democratise the alienated, fetishised, and reified sci-tech-economic complex. Only if the social intersubjectivity of political autonomy democratically conceives of how we live together can the “automatic subject” of capital (Marx)—that is, the anonymous imperatives of competition, growth, and acceleration—be de-automatised and, thereby, re-humanised as well. Without such re-humanisation, which is synonymous to a re-teleologisation, the race into the abyss remains the necessary outcome. In other words, to disenchant the real spell of “dynamic stabilisation” (Rosa), that very dynamic has to be disenchanted for real. Yet, this is only possible by disentangling the *dynamicis* from within, or by bringing it back into human hands, where its genesis lies, and where it can find its end—both as termination and as goal.

Here, it is crucial to refute today’s common confusing of autonomy with domination, to which Rosa, among others, seems to subscribe (Rosa 2019b). Indeed, controlling what has gone mad, been let loose, and split off is not a wish for control of the world but, at the very opposite, a wish to save the world by getting back under control what controls the world as long as it remains uncontrolled. Put differently, to control what is otherwise out of control is to take back control from a “control society” (Deleuze) of automatised controlling, thereby—and only thereby—becoming able to stop the logic, structure, and relation of control to begin with. To be clear: if we do not reclaim the responsibility of the way we produce and reproduce our societies, down to the scientific, technological, and economic realms, including the How of the metabolism with nature, a system out-of-control will be the result, in which the “unavailable” can, indeed, only return as a many-headed monster (Rosa 2020). Beyond this dark outlook, a substantially democratising political autonomy is direly needed which is not about power, domination or subsumption of the world but about reclaiming responsibility for our own projects and products which devastate the world as long as their self-reinforcing cycles are further reproduced in a deregulated manner.

IV

In that sense, political autonomy can serve as a general criterion for the critique of critical theory because it is not only non-substantialist but, at the same time, critically postcapitalist. If it is also supposed to be the pre-normative pre-condition of the good life, however, the question returns to what exactly such a good life could consist of. Let us approach this question with political autonomy in the background. To begin with, a good life would be about living properly and not about being-lived—and especially not about killing in order to survive, nor about living under murderous conditions. That is, a good life consists in living properly, which means living a meaningful lifetime in a good society. Whereas, again, what a meaningful lifetime is can only be decided by those who live it, such decisions on the goodness of living or the meaning of lifetime remain impossible in their realisation as long as life, for the most part, consists in the coercion to work, just and merely to stay alive. In that sense, a life that lives, a “*gelingendes Leben*”, a life that “works”, is a life whose work is beyond labour, if labour is understood as alienated and exploited. Hence, a good life is only possible beyond capitalist labour because the good life must be more and other than mere survival through “making a living.” Now, whereas that much is necessary for a good life, it is not sufficient either. To continue from here, we need to delve more deeply into the concept of political autonomy again.

Since political autonomy consists, next to its political aspect, of two components—of *autos* and *nomos*, of the self (*autos*) and the framework in which this self is embedded (*nomos*)—, the political question of how the *nomos* is established around the *autos* becomes as important as the ontological question what this *autos* is or can be in the first instance. In other words, for political autonomy, the political and the ontological, the self and its *nomos*, the individual and society cannot be separated from each other. Now, the *autos* of political autonomy is, if it can be conceived as a self at all, a self that is in need of its others—including their *nomos*. What forms and informs the *nomos* of political autonomy is thus an *autos* which is an other, not only politically and socially but already somatically. Moreover, to say that the self is not just political but also social-somatic is to say that it is dependent, needy, and fragile. From the angle of political autonomy, then, self-determination cannot be split off from needs since what determines the will of the self is not an abstract logic of a divine mind

but the body's calling of needs. As such, the self has as its kernel, or—more precisely—is in itself what we call a “need to may” (*Bedürfnis nach Dürfen*). What does that mean?

Since the self is dependent and needy, the most basic need of the self is its need to may, based in its dependence. The self's main question is “may I be?” since, without others giving the self the gift to may, no self can enable itself—no self can enable itself solely by itself. Hence, the need to may is similarly a need of being enabled because being-in-the-world is impossible without being-enabled by this world: as a living being, the embodied, earthly, and finite self is in need of being enabled. The good life, in that sense, would only be a life in which each self's need to may—each self's need of being enabled—could and would be at the centre of all public concerns. Consequently, the private and the political, the individual and the social could no longer be split off from each other in the good life either—not, however, due to the rights of some abstract “greater good of all” but due to the very concrete inert vulnerability, singularity, and tenderness of each finite living member of society.

With this outlook, we have gained a glimpse of the good life, of one proposal of *Vivir Bien*, which, within the “wrong life” (Adorno), is impossible to imagine without a utopian horizon—although, as resistance and renitence, it may already be said to exist. This kind of social-somatic, individual-political “utopia” beyond any given societal regime but derived from the self's ontology was already raised by Adorno, who thus transcended his own notorious anti-utopian *Bilderverbot*. Namely, by expressing utopia as the hope of “being different without fear” (Adorno 1970, aphorism 66), Adorno was the first who articulated what we call the need to may as the very baseline of the good life. In his own words, it would be the need to be embraced in one's “non-identity” (Adorno 2015). In fact, Marcuse raised a similar utopian vision beyond the bellicose tendency of permanent competition and constant examination. He called this utopian vision “pacified existence”—a form of living in a society after and beyond the global tyranny of the “performance principle” (Marcuse 1966).

Both Adorno and Marcuse, however, knew that being different without fear and the resulting pacified existence can only come along if capital's regime is replaced with the political autonomy of a substantially democratic governance over the economy, also—convened by vulnerable, finite, and interdependent living beings. After all, good living remains impossible within the context of capitalist conditions since these conditions

bring about a status of life as not valuable in-itself but only qua its carrier's adapted functioning—say, by “making a living.”

V

To conclude, political autonomy is neither about control nor about domination but about a responsible way of living democratically together among those living beings who share both the capacity for responsibility (“moral subjectivity”) and a “universalism of vulnerability” (Pelluchon 2021). As such, political autonomy can serve as a criterion for critical theory because it is truly postcapitalist and thus critical towards the status quo without, thereby, becoming normative or too narrow regarding its conceptualisations of the good. In the long run, political autonomy could enable human animals to live a meaningful lifetime beyond the coercion to labour and other “mute coercions” (Marx) of capitalist relations—thus allowing them a community of collaboration and cooperation also *vis-a-vis* non-human living beings (Gudynas 2009). It is, however, only if capital's mute coercions are deconstructed as “false necessities” and replaced with the substantial democracy of social-somatic, vulnerable, responsible creatures that a good life can be enabled in a good society for all. This is because only then could the need to may and the need of being enabled—the need for a pacified existence, and the need of being allowed to be different without fear—be satisfied for real.

References

- Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund. 1970. *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund. 2015. *Negative Dialektik. Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Böhme, Gernot. 2016. *Ästhetischer Kapitalismus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Gudynas, Eduardo. 2009. “Politische Ökologie: Natur in den Verfassungen von Bolivien und Ecuador.” *Juridikum. Zeitschrift für Kritik – Recht – Gesellschaft* 4: 214–218.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 2019a. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns. Band 1. Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 2019b. *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns. Band 2. Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

- Hägglund, Martin. 2020. *This Life. Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Henning, Christoph. 2015. *Freiheit, Gleichheit, Entfaltung. Die politische Philosophie des Perfektionismus*. Frankfurt a. M./New York: Campus.
- Honneth, Axel. 1992. *Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Lukács, Georg. 2013. *Frühschriften II. Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 1966. *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 1971. *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Meisner, Lukas. 2022. "Objective Alienation. No Essentialism, Nowhere." *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 6, no. 3: 95-134.
- Meisner, Lukas. 2023. "Liquid Reification. A Conceptual Update in Lukács' Spirit." *Jahrbuch der internationalen Lukács-Gesellschaft* 19: 113-126.
- Pelluchon, Corine. 2021. *Das Zeitalter des Lebendigen. Eine neue Philosophie der Aufklärung*. Darmstadt: wbg Academic.
- Postone, Moishe. 2003. *Time, Labour, and Social Domination. A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2019a. *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2019b. "Spirituelle Abhängigkeitserklärung. Die Idee des Mediopassiv als Ausgangspunkt einer radikalen Transformation." In *Große Transformation? Zur Zukunft moderner Gesellschaften*, edited by Klaus Dörre et al., 35-55, Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Rosa, Hartmut. 2020. *Unverfügbarkeit*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.