Critique of philosophy, critique of religion, critique of politics, critique of political economy – there is almost no sphere of modern society of which Karl Marx’s theory does not offer a critique. This makes it all the more necessary to investigate whether these different critiques possess any common traits, be it with respect to their aims or their methods.¹

In what follows, I argue that Marx’s notion of critique is unified by three characteristics and that it is still relevant for contemporary critical theory if understood as practice rather than as science. First, Marx’s critique is always at the same time a critique of forms of knowledge and of the forms of practice that correspond to them. Second, it is practical and emancipatory in the sense that it aims not only to understand, but also to contribute to a transformation of the social world that is already under way. Third, Marx follows Hegel in rejecting the dichotomy between internal and external critique and in opting instead for what can be called immanent critique.² His version of immanent critique focuses on the internal contradictions and crises of a specific social order (modern capitalist society) and its social imaginary. Accordingly, it cannot be reduced to a purely normative undertaking, but involves empirical analyses of both a historical and a sociological kind. In Marx’s theory, analysis and critique are thus inextricably linked. With regard to these three characteristics, Marx’s conception of critique became paradigmatic for the tradition of critical theory and continues to be so up until today.

In order to separate the pertinent features of Marx’s notion of critique from its more problematic or obsolete aspects, I proceed in four steps. I will begin by outlining some of the basic methodological and theoretical premises of the form of critique that can be found in Marx’s work. After presenting the main features of his critique of liberal political
practice and theory as an example of the continuing significance of Marx's perspective, I will look more closely at his critique of religion, which I consider to provide a model for his critique of ideology as such. Finally, I will return to the three traits of Marx's understanding of critique just mentioned and argue against what Jürgen Habermas has called Marxism's 'misunderstanding of itself as science' and for an understanding of critique as practice that is more congenial to the spirit of Marx's project. As I see it, Marx's critical theory, understood in this way, is not only of historical but also of continuing philosophical and political interest. Whereas the class standpoint of the proletariat and the supposed science of historical materialism can no longer provide a secure foundation for critique, the young Marx's credo that critique has to be understood as a contribution to 'the self-clarification ... of the struggles and wishes of the age' is still as apt today as it was in 1843.

1 Methodological and theoretical premises of Marx's critical project

In order to situate the notion of critique within Marx's theory it is necessary to sketch its most basic theoretical and methodological assumptions. Given the immense richness and complexity of Marx's theory, the following will necessarily provide only a very rough outline.

Based on his critique of idealism, Marx's materialism claims that the consciousness of individuals is determined, or conditioned, by their social existence and that the superstructure of society (law, politics, religion, morality, etc.) is determined, or conditioned, by its economic structure, or base. According to Marx, the superstructure is to be explained in terms of its function, namely to contribute to the material reproduction and stabilisation of the existing economic structure. Although this view is compatible with acknowledging the relative independence of the superstructure and its possible influence on economic relations, it already points to the latent economistic reductionism of this model. As Marx emphasises, the social relations that make up the base are 'indispensable' and 'independent of' the will of human beings. One of the main tasks of a critique of ideology is already implicit in this statement, namely, to make consciousness aware of its dependency on material factors. Marx uses materialism to support his critique of the purported independence of consciousness. As he points out with reference to periods of social change:

Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation
by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.8

Marx’s materialism is historical in the sense that it seeks to provide a theory of historical development and conceives of the economic base of society as itself historically evolving. In order to understand these processes, Marx distinguishes between the productive forces (especially labour power and the means of labour, such as machinery) and the relations of production, that is to say the conditions under which workers produce (especially the regime of property). He then argues that historical change is driven by the dynamic relation between these two factors. History can thus be understood in terms of stages of social development:

In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society. The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonisms, but of one arising from the social conditions of life of the individuals; at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism.9

According to this developmental understanding, social revolutions occur when the tension between productive forces and the relations of production becomes too great. In Marx’s view, this tension mounts as the existing relations of production turn from furthering to slowing down or preventing the expansion of productivity and thus begin to function as ‘fetters’. In the end, as Marx notes in the Communist Manifesto, they cannot but ‘burst asunder’.10

How does this structural model relate to Marx’s understanding of history in terms of class struggle, that is to say of revolutionary practice? It should first be noted that he does not understand the historical process as an automatism unfolding behind the backs of the agents. History, Marx notes, ‘is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims’.11 At the same time, and against any type of voluntarism, Marx insists that this activity is depending on objective conditions. This
is particularly evident with regard to revolutionary activity. Objective circumstances provide the conditions of possibility of revolutionary change, since without them not even classes as the collective agents engaging in such activity would exist. Since the conditions in question are to be understood as necessary but not as sufficient conditions, however, struggle against the powers that be is still necessary in order to transform society. Accordingly, the structural perspective has to be complemented by a more agency-oriented one since there are no revolutions without revolutionary practice.

In a similar vein, Marx attempts to move beyond the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism, proposing a relational account that eschews any attempt to reduce the complexity of social relations. To be sure, Marx frequently refers to human nature, or, more precisely, to the ‘species-being’ (Gattungswesen), and he can be considered to ground his social critique in a philosophical anthropology that portrays capitalism as systematically obstructing the full realisation of central human capabilities and the satisfaction of basic human needs. Yet he does not conceive of human nature in an ahistorical or essentialist way. Rather, in his view, it is subject to social conditions and historical changes, and in the final analysis has to be understood as the object of humanity’s self-creation through labour, ‘as the outcome of man’s own labour’.12 Accordingly, what an individual is and does is essentially social, but at the same time social reality is constituted in and through the concrete social practices that individuals engage in:

Just as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him. ... What is to be avoided above all is the re-establishing of ‘Society’ as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual. The individual is the social being.13

Before turning to Marx’s critique of liberal political practice and theory as an exemplary case that can illustrate the continuing significance of his perspective in the next section, I want to sketch briefly the role that he assigns to politics. For Marx, ‘legal relations as well as forms of state are to be grasped neither from themselves nor from the so-called general development of the human mind, but rather have their roots in the material conditions of life’.14 In opposition to what he takes to be Hegel’s ‘mystical’ hypostatisation of the state into a subject, Marx takes the state to be an abstraction that has no independent existence. Rather, the state – and political and legal institutions in general – are the outcome of social struggles and at the same time provide the institutional
context of further struggles. For this reason, Marx speaks of the state as the ‘catalogue’ of mankind’s practical struggles. At least for the early Marx, democracy is the only political regime that explicitly acknowledges that ‘it is not the constitution which creates the people but the people which creates the constitution’, thereby abolishing the state as a power that is separate from society and transcends it. Marx’s critique of ‘state fetishism’ as ideological conceives of the state as an expression of alienation, as something that human beings produce and nonetheless experience as alien. In this respect, the argument shares important features with Marx’s critique of religion, to which I will turn in the third section: both religion and the state have to be subjected to a defetishising critique. Accordingly, the Communist Manifesto speaks of ‘the battle of and for democracy [Erkämpfung der Demokratie]’. This battle aims at overcoming the kind of alienation that goes hand in hand with the distinction between rulers and ruled. Contrary to what Marx’s critics sometimes assume, the aim is not to emancipate people from politics, but to enable them to engage in politics as collective self-determination. The latter, however, is only possible after politics as we know it, that is to say in the form of the state and of class struggle, has come to an end. Throughout his work, Marx argues that sustainable emancipation requires a radical, irreducibly social and political revolution instead of partial and local reforms aimed at surface-level symptoms. Only then will it be possible, in his view, to replace ‘the illusory community’ of the state with ‘the real community’ of a communist society in which ‘the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association’. Only such ‘a community of free individuals’ will be able to reconcile the values of community, individual freedom and self-realisation.

Although Marx acknowledges the need to organise political struggle, he insists that emancipation has to be understood, and can only be achieved, as self-emancipation. Contrary to many Marxists after him, he holds that the proletariat cannot be liberated by an avant-garde claiming special insight into moral truths or the laws of history, but has to liberate itself by means of a revolution. Accordingly, Marx refuses to assign such a privileged position to himself:

When the International was formed we expressly formulated the battle cry: The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself. We cannot, therefore, co-operate with people who openly state that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves and must first be freed from above by philanthropic big bourgeois and petty bourgeois.
In other words, by advocating worker empowerment, Marx's approach can serve to criticise authoritarian forms of revolutionary practice.

2 A Marxist critique of liberalism

On the basis of this rough sketch of Marx's critical project we can now turn to his critique of liberalism so as to provide a more substantial illustration of the continuing significance of his perspective as well as to indicate some of its limits. Before raising some worries about Marx's critique of liberalism – both in its theoretical variants and as the prevailing self-understanding of capitalist societies – I will first present six aspects of it.

(i) Marx exposes what he takes to be a blind spot of traditional political philosophy, namely, the economic and social conditions that shape politics. In his view, politics possesses at most relative autonomy vis-à-vis these conditions. Furthermore, Marx's 'realism' counters the view, which often accompanies the illusion of political autonomy, that politics, the state and the law are neutral institutions allegedly acting in the name of justice or the common good. Contrary to this idealistic and moralistic understanding of politics, Marx insists that under capitalist conditions politics has to be understood primarily as class struggle in which the state and the law are just two means of domination. All struggles within the state, he notes, 'the struggle between democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, the struggle for the franchise, etc., etc., are merely the illusory forms in which the real struggles of the different classes are fought out among one another'.

(ii) Marx criticises the bourgeois interpretation and institutionalisation of freedom and equality. In his view, the bourgeois understanding of rights and freedom expresses the individualism and atomism characteristic of social relations under capitalism. He does not restrict himself to pointing out that equal individual rights and equality of opportunity are, at least in their predominant understanding, compatible with massive social and economic inequalities (such as the unequal distribution of resources and means of production as well as the concentration and centralisation of capital). In addition, he insists that these inequalities in some way legitimate and thereby help to reproduce what he sees as the structural problems of capitalist societies. These problems cannot be comprehensively addressed within the system, for example by redistributive measures, as the social democrats – naively and with fatal political consequences, in Marx's view – assume.
(iii) According to Marx, liberal political practices reproduce structural features of capitalist societies, features that cannot be captured by liberal theories focusing on rights and justice. Thus, he takes it to be a central fact about capitalism that workers are exploited. For they are, albeit under the mantle of a contract between consenting adults, forced to produce surplus value for persons that can take advantage of their structural position of dependency and vulnerability.

(iv) Furthermore, under capitalism – due to structural features such as the division and commodification of labour – people suffer from various kinds of alienation, particularly alienation from the product of their work, their own activity, their species-being and their fellow humans. Alienation can thus be understood as a form of distortion of one’s relation to oneself, to the social and political world and to nature. A non-alienated way of life, in contrast, would involve the productive appropriation of the world through labour as well as an adequate relation to oneself, the natural world and other human beings. Alienation thus has two dimensions: the incapacity to make sense of one’s actions and a feeling of powerlessness with regard to the conditions of one’s existence. It is both an individual and collective failure to be the subject of one’s actions.

(v) Ideology and false consciousness are characteristic of life under capitalism as well. In contrast to a simple illusion, ideology is grounded in social reality and has to be understood as a necessary form of false consciousness in the sense that it is functionally necessary for the reproduction of the status quo. One of the most pertinent forms of ideology is the naturalisation of historically evolved and transformable social relations (including capitalism itself). Seemingly self-evident and inevitable, these relations are shielded from effective contestation and challenge. Another form of ideology is the representation of the particular interests of the ruling class as universal and as conducive to the common good. According to Marx, in a society marked by class antagonism the common good is an inherently ideological category. With regard to both these cases it can easily be seen why the critique of ideology is of fundamental importance to Marx’s project: freeing oneself from ideological illusions is a precondition for engaging in emancipatory political action.

(vi) One last point is Marx’s critique of the liberal focus on questions of justice, especially distributive justice. For a start, Marx notes that a focus on redistribution only leads to cosmetic corrections of the status quo as long as the relations of production (and the question of a just distribution of the means of production) are not tackled. More fundamentally,
Marx can be understood as criticising liberalism’s acceptance of certain conflicts as naturally given when they are in fact the outcome of a specific social formation, namely capitalism, and are to be overcome rather than merely contained and softened.

In a classical formulation, adopted from Hume to Rawls, the ‘circumstances of justice’, that is to say the conditions that have to be in place in order for the concept of justice to be meaningfully applicable at all, are moderate scarcity of resources, as a fact about the world, and limited altruism, as a fact about human psychology. Given these conditions, conflicts are inevitable and rules for their just adjudication called for. Marx, however, denies that these are timeless and universal features of our world and of ourselves and claims that both conditions can and will be overcome under communism – thanks to a further increase in productive forces and a reshaping of human motives and needs under radically altered social circumstances (presumably expensive tastes and intrinsically competitive preferences will vanish together with the social formation under which they arose and flourished). Obviously, such a characterisation of communist society stands in danger of moving it from a realist to a non-realist utopia, a drift Marx explicitly seeks to avoid.26 In any case, Marx seems to locate communism beyond justice in the sense that it will be a society in which a certain type of conflict no longer exists and which will therefore no longer give rise to demands of justice that are tied to the mistaken belief in abstract normative principles that could be impartially administered by the state.27

Implicitly at least, our discussion of the merits of Marx’s perspective already points to some of its limits. I briefly want to mention three of them. The first problem relates to Marx’s apparent economism. Even if one admits that on a charitable reading Marx seeks to replace the mystifying idea of an absolutely autonomous realm of politics with the idea that politics is not independent from economic and social conditions (nor fully determined by them), there is an obvious tendency in his analysis to reduce political factors to economic ones. A second set of problems concerns the teleological or deterministic tendencies in his understanding of history and their implications for the understanding of political agency. Since it seems that capitalism must necessarily fall victim to the contradictions that it engenders, why struggle? Apparently there is a fundamental and unresolved tension here. On the one hand, according to historical materialism, revolutionary change occurs because existing relations of production become fetters for the further development of the productive forces. Political struggle, then, does not play an independent role, but merely ‘acts as a midwife, bringing about
what is doomed to come about sooner or later'.

On the other hand, Marx emphasises the fundamental role of class struggle in history and the need for organising the revolutionary power of the proletariat in order to achieve a radical social and political transformation. A third worry, to which I will return in the last section, pertains to the relation between the scientific aspirations of Marx's theory and its critical, normative and, ultimately, philosophical character.

3 The critique of religion as model

After having sketched the basic theoretical and methodological premises, merits and limits of Marx's critical project, I will now turn to his critique of religion in order to reach a clearer understanding of how the notion of critique really works and in which sense it can be understood as immanent. Marx himself assigns a special place to the critique of religion within his critical project. As he famously notes in his early Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, 'the critique of religion is the premise of all critique'. This remark has at least three aspects. First, the critique of religion is the premise or beginning of all critique since it is the historically earliest form and emerges within the realm of religion itself, primarily in the form of a critique of fetishism and of what is regarded as the projection of human desires and characteristics onto a divine subject. Second, it is a precondition in a more systematic sense, since it is only possible to move on to a radical critique and transformation of the economic and political structure of society once it is no longer regarded as divinely sanctioned (although Marx does not deny that more limited forms of social critique can also be justified with reference to religion). In other words, one has to be able to see law and the state as social institutions that have been created and hence can be changed in order to be able to ask how they should be changed. As Marx puts it: 'The critique of religion disillusions man so that he will think, act and fashion his reality as a man who has lost his illusions and regained his reason.' Third, it provides a methodological model for the forms of critique to come, the mode of critique that will be paradigmatic for Marx and for critical theory in the Marxist tradition.

For Marx, the critique of religion also has priority because religion is a paradigm case of ideology. As a form of false consciousness, religion masks the very contradictions of society that give rise to it, either by presenting them as natural and divinely ordained or by simulating their overcoming and providing consolation. Its effect is the alleged
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reconciliation of human beings with what they falsely perceive as their inevitable fate.\textsuperscript{31} For this reason, Marx calls religion an ‘inverted world consciousness’.\textsuperscript{32}

In which sense can Marx’s critique of religion be seen as a paradigmatic example of immanent critique that still informs contemporary critical theory? The following three features characterise its basic argumentative structure.

(i) As is well known, Feuerbach criticised religion by arguing that religious beliefs are projections of human values. Since in worshipping god we in fact worship our own rational nature, Feuerbach can turn the Bible’s wording around and say that man created god in his own image. Thus, his critique consists in an anthropological reduction of the content of religious beliefs. For Feuerbach, religious beliefs are symptoms of human alienation (\textit{Entfremdung}) and estrangement (\textit{Entzweiung}). His critique of religion is therefore not only negative, for it seeks to make human self-realisation possible by negating the religious negation of humanity. Influenced by Feuerbach, Marx subscribes to the thesis of projection. However, understanding religious beliefs as projections implies that the critique does not directly challenge the content of religious beliefs (it does not, for example, directly engage in a refutation of god’s existence). Going beyond Feuerbach, Marx’s critique rather takes these beliefs to reveal something about the social and political situation of the subjects who have these beliefs. In this respect Marx’s way of proceeding is fundamentally different from the traditional ‘enlightenment critique’ or a straightforward philosophical refutation of religion, as it is practiced for example by Voltaire, or later, in logical positivism’s critique of religious statements as meaningless.

(ii) Marx understands religion as a symptom of real social and political conflicts rather than as a mere delusion or an error for which the believers could be blamed. Having religious beliefs is seen as a ‘well-founded’ illusion in the sense that there are objective reasons for turning towards religion, although these may well conflict with the ‘real’ interests of subjects. The critique of religion cannot be merely cognitive, for just appealing to the subjects’ consciousness will not change the underlying reality. Accordingly, Marx transforms Feuerbach’s still psychologistic account into one that focuses on ‘the cleavage and self-contradictions’ of the social world, as he writes in the fourth of his \textit{Theses on Feuerbach}. Marx’s critique aims at those social conditions that necessarily produce the need for religion on the part of subjects who are the victims of socially induced suffering. In other words, his critique targets the social reality that produces, or at least encourages, these needs rather than the
religious convictions themselves. As Marx puts it, religious illusions are at the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against it – ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature’. Thus, he sees religion as a symptom of self-alienation that can be traced back to the alienating effects of the established social order. The critique of religion therefore, in Marx’s view, leads to ‘the categorical imperative to overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being’, that is to say, those conditions that give rise to religion in the first place.

(iii) Marx’s critique of religion is sublating [aufhebend] in the Hegelian sense: it is negating, transforming and preserving at the same time. It does not simply dismiss the complaints, grievances, desires and needs that give rise to religion, but challenges the way that they come into existence and the way that they are – supposedly – satisfied. The critique of religion aims at sublation and reconciliation in the sense that it aims to allow subjects to realise what is, according to the critic, the immanent normative content of religion, for example the vision of a life without suffering and humiliation. Once the social conditions for such a life have been established by a radical social transformation, human beings will no longer need the consolations provided by religion because the conflicts that gave rise to them will have ceased to exist. Thus, Marx’s critique of religion can be seen as proceeding in an immanent way: while criticising religion in its present form, he preserves the criterion of a life without suffering that it contains and takes this criterion to a level at which the conditions for its realisation are in place.

Whether or not one agrees that the critique of religion should aim at such a reconciliation, it is important to note that according to Marx the disappearance of religion is not the automatic outcome of a historical process, but rather a goal to be achieved by critical theory and practice. As with the other forms of alienation mentioned above, Marx’s critique targets religion as an obstacle to the realisation of individual and collective autonomy. It is therefore not restricted to the public or political role of religion. In contrast to most varieties of liberalism, Marx does not assume that religion can be ‘neutralised’ by relegating it to the private realm – indeed, this is precisely what he in On the Jewish Question considers to block what he calls ‘human emancipation’. This kind of emancipation rather requires a transformation of individuals, their social relations, and their self-understanding. As I claimed at the beginning, Marx’s understanding of critique as practice conceives of critique as contributing to precisely such a transformation.
4 Critique as practice rather than science

As the discussion in the preceding sections has shown, Marx’s critical project can be seen to have a certain unity despite its complexity. On his understanding, critique aims at forms of knowledge as well as their corresponding forms of practice, its aim is emancipatory, and it proceeds immanently rather than by resorting to external criteria. In this final section, I want to return briefly to these features and indicate why the corresponding form of critique is still relevant for contemporary critical theory.

What Seyla Benhabib says of Marx’s critique of political economy holds for his entire critical enterprise, namely, that it is ‘both a critique of a specific mode of theoretical and social consciousness, and a critique of a specific mode of social production’.35 In the case of his critique of political economy, Marx targets the discourse of classical political economy (as a form of consciousness) as well as at capitalism itself. ‘The error of the bourgeois economists,’ he writes, consists in regarding ‘economic categories as eternal and not as historical laws which are only laws for a particular historical development’.36 The critique of capitalism as inhumane, unjust and irrational therefore has to be accompanied by a critique of the bourgeois forms of knowledge, which present a historically specific and politically changeable mode of production as natural and thus as apolitical and unchangeable.

Furthermore, this double critique is practical and engaged in the sense that it takes sides in a conflict that already precedes it. It is not a critique that Marx is putting forth in his own name, but rather one that he takes to be linked to a ‘real movement’. On this understanding, Marx’s talk of communism is entirely compatible with his critique of utopian and idealist thinking:

Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.37

A movement both in the historical and the political sense, communism is understood as being immanent to the actual social and historical situation, while at the same time involving a radical negation of the existing social order. This is clearly expressed in Marx’s comments on the Paris Commune:

The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce par décret du peuple.
They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.  

Marx’s idea of communism is thus inextricably related to the idea of revolutionary self-emancipation. His commitment to this idea stands in the way of any unambiguous reliance on the supposedly inevitable march of history or the allegedly scientific insights of historical materialism.

The understanding of critique that goes together with this commitment is immanent in the sense that it is anchored in actually existing forms of theoretical as well as practical critique, in the social struggles that people actually engage in (although it may also involve articulating the experiences of those who do not yet engage in struggles of their own). As ‘critique in a hand-to-hand fight’ it eschews any claim to a position exterior or superior to these struggles, which obviously does not imply that it has to accept uncritically prevailing self-understandings. However, Marxian critique primarily proceeds in a negative way, focusing on the obstacles to revolutionary self-emancipation, wary of switching from critical to prophetic and elitist modes of thought.

It is characteristic of Marx’s notion of immanent critique that its criteria are not derived abstractly by appealing to moral principles, an a-historical human nature or scientific truths. Rather than providing the sources of critique, value systems, conceptions of human nature and allegedly scientific discourses are themselves turned into objects of critique. Since normative principles, for example, are not accessible in abstraction from historically concrete social contexts and often fulfil an ideological function – being ‘so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests’ – critique cannot proceed by confronting an allegedly deficient reality with an abstractly derived ideal or norm. Instead of focusing on ‘simplistic questions of conscience and clichés about justice’ and indulging in ‘moral indignation’, immanent critique has to be based on an analysis of social reality and find its criteria in social practices, struggles, experiences and self-understandings. On Marx’s view, critique contributes to social practices of self-understanding, which are, however, to be conceived not as a harmonious exchange of reasons in a
power-free discursive universe, but as themselves being the domain of social struggles.

This emphasis on the practical character of Marx’s theory, particularly evident in his early writings, should not be taken to mean that there are no countervailing tendencies in his work. Sometimes Marx does appeal to substantial ideas of human nature or the true community. More importantly, the (ultimately failed) ‘attempt to leave philosophy’ and to transform his theory into a truly scientific approach that effectively breaks with speculative thought paves the way to Marxism’s ‘misunderstanding of itself as science’. Against a one-sidedly objectivist and positivist (self-)interpretation, however, I would maintain that the originality of Marx’s thought is lost when it is forced into the simplistic alternative of being either a science or just another philosophical approach. The third alternative exemplified by Marx’s work, which I take to be still paradigmatic for the project of a critical theory of society, integrates descriptive, explanatory and normative elements. Although such an approach will include an irreducibly philosophical dimension, it is not to be confused with a form of philosophy that tends to ignore – and in Marx’s view necessarily ignores – its own historical and social conditions. For Marx, any purely philosophical approach is inherently limited because it ignores the fact that its realisation depends not on itself, but on reality, that it is a matter of social practice rather than pure theory. The model of critical thought exemplified by Marx’s theory thus breaks with the abstraction from real social circumstances and actual social struggles characteristic of traditional philosophical approaches.

What are the lessons that contemporary critical theory can draw from this model? For a start, theories can only claim to be critical if they are aware of their own historicity, avoid dogmatic and idealist appeals to abstract norms, and self-reflexively question their own status as well as their political implications. As noted, a second lesson for contemporary critical theory is that it cannot proceed in a purely normative way, but has to aim at integrating philosophical, historical and sociological aspects. Focusing on obstacles to individual and collective practices of self-understanding and empowerment, it has to encompass both the diagnosis and the critique of current forms of socially induced suffering. If critique is to understand itself as a form of self-reflection anchored in the actual experiences and struggles of our times, it has to avoid constructing an asymmetrical opposition between science and critique, on the one hand, and the purportedly naive perspective of ‘ordinary’ agents, on the other hand. Although his own writings at
times seem to presuppose or imply such an asymmetry, it may well be that this critical, anti-paternalist and anti-dogmatic spirit is still best captured in Marx's early Letter to Ruge:

[W]e do not attempt dogmatically to prefigure the future, but want to find the new world only through critique of the old. Up to now the philosophers had the solution of all riddles lying in their lectern, and the stupid uninitiated world had only to open its jaws to let the roast partridges of absolute science fly into its mouth. ... the designing of the future and the proclamation of ready-made solutions for all time is not our affair ... we shall confront the world not as doctrinaires with a new principle: 'Here is the truth, bow down before it!' We develop new principles to the world out of its own principles. We do not say to the world: 'Stop fighting; your struggle is of no account. We want to shout the true slogan of the struggle at you.' ... So, we can express the credo of our journal in one word: the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age.46

Notes

2. See Karin de Boer's contribution to this volume.
4. R. C. Tucker (ed.), The Marx--Engels Reader (New York: Norton, 1978), 15 (translation modified) (hereafter MER); K. Marx and F. Engels, Werke (Berlin: Dietz, 1956–1990), Vol. 1, 346 (hereafter MEW). Several caveats are in place: the reliance on the early Marx's methodological self-understanding as against the objectivist and positivist tendencies of some of his later works stands in need of further justification – here I can only acknowledge it, together with the almost complete bracketing of Marx's critique of political economy as elaborated in Capital. Consequently, this chapter can only provide a partial view, not only of Marx's theory, but also of the understanding of critique it involves. Furthermore, neither the relation between Marx's theory and his own political engagement in the workers' movement nor his influence on 'actually existing socialism' – both questions of considerable historical, but less of philosophical interest – will be discussed.
6. One example for Marx's awareness of such a Wechselwirkung is his discussion of politically established legal regulations of the length of the working day in Capital (see MER 361–376 / MEW, Vol. 23, 245–320).
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9. Ibid.
11. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), Vol. 4, 93/ MEW, Vol. 2, 98. As the famous statement from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* goes, ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past’ (MER 595 / MEW, Vol. 8, 115). In another passage (MER 595 / MEW, Vol. 12, 4), these two aspects are concisely linked: ‘History is the judge – its executioner, the proletarian.’
12. MER 112 / MEW, Suppl. Vol. 1, 574. See also MER 145 / MEW, Vol. 3, 6: ‘the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.’
15. MER 20 / MEW, Vol. 1, 231; Marx concludes that ‘In democracy the constitution itself appears only as one determination, that is, the self-determination of the people.’ Therefore, ‘Democracy is the solved riddle of all constitutions.’ On this notion of democracy see M. Abensour, *Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).
16. Indeed, Marx conceives of the critique of political economy in an analogous way, characterising capitalism as a ‘society, in which the process of production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him’, and later adding: ‘As, in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalistic production, he is governed by the products of his own hand’ (MER 327, 422 / MEW, Vol. 23, 95, 649). See S. Benhabib, ‘The Marxian Method of Critique: Normative Presuppositions’, *PRAXIS International*, 3, 1984, 284–298.
17. MER 490 (translation modified) / MEW, Vol. 4, 481.
18. MER 195, 197 / MEW, Vol. 3, 73–74; see also MER 491 / MEW, Vol. 4, 482, where communist society is understood as ‘an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’.
22. For a helpful summary of Marx’s criticism of bourgeois rights, see W. Brown, ‘Rights and Losses’, in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 114: ‘(1) Bourgeois rights are rendered necessary by the depoliticised material conditions of
unemancipated, inegalitarian civil society, conditions that rights themselves depoliticise rather than articulate or resolve. (2) They entrench by naturalizing the egoism of capitalist society ... thereby masking social power and mistaking its effects – atomistic individuals – for its wellspring and agents. (3) They construct an illusory politics of equality, liberty, and community in the domain of the state, a politics that is contradicted by the unequal, unfree, and individualistic domain of civil society. (4) They legitimise by naturalizing various stratifying social powers in civil society, and they disguise the state's collusion with this social power, thereby also legitimating the state as a neutral and universal representative of the people.' Obviously, it can be debated whether this criticism exhausts the emancipatory potential of even bourgeois rights.

23. For a more detailed discussion see A. Wood, Karl Marx (London: Routledge, 2004), Ch. 16.
26. The question of utopianism involves complicated issues of interpretation.
   To give just one example, it is disputed whether the formulation from The German Ideology according to which in communist society it becomes possible for the individual ‘to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind’ (MER 160 / MEW, Vol. 3, 33), is to be taken either seriously or ironically. For a defence of taking it seriously, see W. J. Booth, ‘Gone Fishing: Making Sense of Marx’s Concept of Communism’, Political Theory, 17/2, 1989, 205–222; for a more sceptical reading, see J. Wolff, Why Read Marx Today? (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 97–98.
31. A similar argument is put forth by Freud. In his view, religion is the illusory solution to conflicts that mark human life. It is illusory since it does not keep what it promises, since ultimately it cannot provide the comfort that believers are striving for, i.e. the reconciliation with one’s fate and the compensation for one’s sacrifices. See E. Rottenberg’s contribution in this volume.
33. MER 54 / MEW, Vol. 1, 379. In this context one should also remember Freud’s famous distinction between illusion and error, where the former has a basis in actually existing needs and desires (and is not necessarily false). Freud seems to agree with Marx that the deep psychological investment and attachment of the believer requires a thorough process of social and personal transformation.
34. MER 60 / MEW, Vol. 1, 385. See also MER 54 / MEW, Vol. 1, 379: ‘The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions.’


36. MER 140 / MEW, Vol. 4, 552.


39. MER 56 (translation modified) / MEW, Vol. 1, 381.

40. MER 482 / MEW, Vol. 4, 472.


42. See Habermas, ‘Between Philosophy and Science’ and D. Brudney, *Marx’s Attempt to Leave Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). It should be noted, however, that there is also a long tradition of interpreting Marx’s critique of political economy in non-scientistic terms; see Renault, *Marx et l’idée de critique*.

43. This is why for the young Marx philosophy ‘can only be realised by the abolition [Aufhebung] of the proletariat, and the proletariat can only be abolished by the realisation of philosophy’ (MER 65 / MEW, Vol. 1, 391). See G. Hindrichs, ‘Das Erbe des Marxismus’, *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 54/5, 2006, 709–729.

44. See, e.g., Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*.

45. For a more detailed characterisation of such an understanding of critical theory see R. Celikates, *Kritik als soziale Praxis* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2009) and R. Celikates, ‘From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique’, *Constellations*, 13/1, 2006, 21–40.