



Positivism–Polemics–Politics: On the Failed Dialogue Between Critical Theory and Logical Empiricism

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Critical social theory versus affirmation

Polemics may start with the use of terms, for the members of the Vienna Circle and especially its protagonist in the dispute in question, Otto Neurath, never claimed the term positivism for their approach. On the contrary, Neurath clearly distinguished himself from the positivism of the 19th century and ultimately preferred the term “logical empiricism,” as his unpublished reply to an essay by Max Horkheimer, written in 1937, also shows.¹ Max

1 Max Horkheimer, “Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6, no. 1 (1937): 4-52. Translated as “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics,” in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 132-187. Otto Neurath, “*Einheitswissenschaft und Logischer Empirismus. Eine Erwiderung*,” Typoscript (1937), K 63, 203, Wiener Kreis Archiv, Haarlem (NL). Translated as “Unity of Science and Logical Empiricism: A Reply,” in *Otto Neurath and the Unity of Science*, eds. John Symons, Olga Pombo, and Juan Manuel Torres (Dordrecht/Heidelberg/London/New York: Springer, 2011), 15-30.

Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, on the other hand, did not use the term exclusively, but repeatedly for their counterpart, both in internal correspondence and in published texts. In response to Max Horkheimer's anti-positivist essay "Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik" (The Latest Attack on Metaphysics) in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Walter Benjamin wrote approvingly to the latter that philosophical critique, as soon as it steps out of the framework of a historical treatise, "today has most chance (...) of doing justice to its task in polemical form."² So was this polemical form the adequate stylistic device in a struggle between antagonistic intellectual groups?

The thesis of seemingly irreconcilable opposites between logical empiricism and critical theory has been relativized by research. In his key work on the subject, Hans-Joachim Dahms worked out that the positivism controversy of the 1960s had already been preceded in the 1930s by a dispute between members of the Frankfurt School (above all Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno) and the Vienna Circle (above all Otto Neurath).³ He pointed out parallels and similarities between the two intellectual groups, in their academic traditions, forms of institutionalization, their scientific doctrines and, not least, in their political attitudes.⁴ Among other things, it turned out that the polarization between a socially critical versus an affirmative (social) philosophy was by no means accurate. In fact, the polemic was not least ignited by this, by the political stance, or more precisely by the actual or supposed political implications and consequences of scientific approaches. Thomas Uebel and John O'Neill took up this debate again in the 2000s and explored possibilities for a constructive dialogue between critical theory and logical empiricism. Without downplaying differences, they too indicate many points of contact.⁵

The focus of this essay, however, is different. It does not deal with philosophical differences and commonalities between the two groups or with the question of possibilities for dialogue between logical empiricism and critical theory. These questions have been dealt with in detail in the publications mentioned earlier. The focus is rather on polemics as an instrument of dis-

2 Walter Benjamin to Max Horkheimer, November 3, 1937, in Hans-Joachim Dahms, *Positivismustreit. Die Auseinandersetzungen der Frankfurter Schule mit dem logischen Positivismus, dem amerikanischen Pragmatismus und dem kritischen Rationalismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 146.

3 The Vienna Circle was a discussion group centered around philosopher Moritz Schlick. The name probably came from Neurath, who wanted to evoke positive associations such as the Viennese waltz or Viennese apple strudel.

4 Dahms, *Positivismustreit*, 22-43.

5 John O'Neill and Thomas Uebel, "Horkheimer and Neurath: Restarting a Disrupted Debate," *European Journal of Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2000): 75-105; John O'Neill and Thomas Uebel, "Logical Empiricism as Critical Theory: The Debate Continues," *Analyse & Kritik* 30 (2008): 379-398.

cussion and debate: Why did arguments about possible cooperation take on polemical forms and from which side did these polemics emanate? What consequences did these polemics ultimately lead to?

From first contact to termination

The decisive factor for the first contact between the two groups was that the Frankfurt Institute was looking for cooperative partners after it had had to leave Germany due to the National Socialists' seizure of power in January 1933. After European stopovers, it was then in New York. Otto Neurath had also fled Austria because of the threat of political persecution and had built up a new professional existence in the Netherlands. In January 1936, Horkheimer visited him in The Hague, where Neurath's Mundaneum Institute was located. Meetings and discussion evenings followed in early October and mid-November 1936 in the rooms of the Institute for Social Research in New York—on the occasion of Neurath's trips to America. Horkheimer and Neurath both took part and interpreted these meetings differently. While Neurath basically held on to the perspective of cooperation and welcomed it, Horkheimer's interests seemed to move away from cooperation towards his anti-positivist essay.

The essay "Der neueste Angriff auf die Metaphysik" appeared in the spring 1937 issue of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. It can almost be considered a collaboration between Horkheimer and Adorno,⁶ for the two exchanged ideas extensively while Horkheimer was working on it and Adorno passed on numerous suggestions. After reading the completed essay, he confessed to knowing hardly any other text by Horkheimer that he "could subscribe to so unconditionally," even mentioning passages that had "truly enthused" him.⁷

Another meeting, which took place on the fringes of the Third International Congress for the Unity of Science in Paris in the summer of 1937, ended without a concrete result. With Adorno's choice as envoy and rapporteur to Horkheimer, who was not present—Adorno referred to Horkheimer as his "Ribbentrop"⁸—the chances of reaching an understanding did not seem to increase. Moreover, the atmosphere of the discussion was already strained by the published text of the Institute's director. The fact that Max Horkheimer

6 Dahms, *Positivismusstreit*, 86-87.

7 Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, March 23, 1937, in *Max Horkheimer. Gesammelte Schriften. Band 16: Briefwechsel 1937–1940*, eds. Alfred Schmidt and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1995), 97.

8 Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, August 7, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:211.

finally refused to print Neurath's reply to his article in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* sealed the definitive end of the cooperation efforts.

Polemic and reply: The essays of Horkheimer and Neurath

In his essay, which he had written around the turn of the year 1936/37, Horkheimer criticized the superficiality of positivism, its "identification of thought with the special sciences," the "hypostatization" of an only apparently objective science and a resulting affirmation of the status quo. The fact that Ernst Mach, as well as members of the Vienna Circle, "was himself a progressive and many members of his school embraced liberal ideas" was pure coincidence, because the "empiricist doctrine offers no remedy for political and spiritual superstition. The intellectual honesty of individual personalities and the acute mental vision of certain of their scientific achievements does not make their philosophies any better," Horkheimer stated.⁹

To illustrate the positivists' alleged inability to distinguish between essence and appearance, surface and core, he used the example of a group of visitors opposed to vivisection. They were deceived by the head of a laboratory about the suffering of laboratory animals: their vocal cords were surgically removed before experiments, and since no cries of pain could be heard from the tortured creatures, the animal rights activists left reassured. "The pleasure [...] derived from the gullibility of those good people," Horkheimer concluded, was "a perfect example of the pleasure to be derived from naïve empiricism in a world in which everything is attuned to deception."¹⁰ If, on the other hand, one wanted to understand what is at stake in each case with the facts as well as with science in general, one must have "the key to the historical situation, the right social theory," he remarked elsewhere.¹¹ That this could only be the dialectical theory of society was unquestionable for the author.

In some places, Horkheimer also pointed to connections between positivism and fascism. In a footnote to his article, for example, he made a connection between the approval of relativism on the part of the "positivist" Neurath and the relativism to which Mussolini referred.¹² He also criticized a "superficiality and presumption" among the new empiricists towards products of cultural heritage and intellectual activity, which reminded him of "nationalistic uprisings and the bonfires associated with them."¹³ Science, as understood by

9 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:184.

10 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:152.

11 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:159.

12 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:165 n.1.

13 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:174.

the positivists, was welcomed by powerful economic forces; their ideology leads “to the perpetuation of the *status quo*.”¹⁴

Uncritical belief in science, hypostatization of exact science, no better than metaphysics, affirmation of the status quo, precursor of fascism—the accusations against “positivism” were not insignificant.

A version of Neurath’s allusive reply to Horkheimer’s contribution (it is a typescript with handwritten corrections) can be found in Neurath’s partial estate in Haarlem (NL). We do not know whether it is the version he sent to Horkheimer. Overall, Neurath’s text was clearly less polemically formulated. He obviously wanted to find the appropriate tone for a scientific debate, above all to correct “misunderstandings and distortions.”¹⁵ In doing so, he also distanced himself from his opponent, whose “style of writing” and “overly rarefied similes” showed his “emotional involvement.”¹⁶ After some general remarks on scientific work, Neurath explained the terms unity of science, logical empiricism, and physicalism, noting where Horkheimer had not interpreted them correctly in his view. In addition, he pointed to the ambiguity of the concept of dialectics, which was central to Horkheimer, and to the fact that Horkheimer insisted on the need for a “correct” theory without giving criteria for how such correctness could be established. Repeatedly, he also criticized its “meta-scientific” or “extra-scientific” method.¹⁷ He commented ironically on the vivisection example: “does Horkheimer believe that an empiricist, trained in biology and sociology, and hence immodest, who would even be somewhat skeptical in this case, will have more trouble discovering the act of surgery than a critic schooled in Horkheimer’s dialectic?”¹⁸

In view of the very heavy—not least also political—accusations, it was a relatively matter-of-fact reply, which did not, however, refrain from certain pointed remarks, such as when he noted Horkheimer’s “emotional phrases,” wrote of his “metaphorical and simile ridden accounts” and noted the numerous “metaphysical expressions.” He also questioned his concept of reason. “An empiricist can engage himself in the unitary science with unwavering determination without need for some kind of ‘reason’ to proclaim that one and only one way is correct, and he is the one who knows which one it is,” he noted.¹⁹

Neurath’s essay “Inventory of the Standard of Living” also appeared in the same issue of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in which Horkheimer’s text was printed. It had been translated into English by the Institute and

14 Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:179.

15 Neurath, *Einheitswissenschaft und Logischer Empirismus*, 17.

16 Neurath, *Einheitswissenschaft und Logischer Empirismus*, 17.

17 Neurath, *Einheitswissenschaft und Logischer Empirismus*, 21/22.

18 Neurath, *Einheitswissenschaft und Logischer Empirismus*, 27.

19 Neurath, *Einheitswissenschaft und Logischer Empirismus*, 28.

placed apart from the German-language contributions. While Neurath interpreted this as a positive gesture towards Horkheimer himself, but also towards Philipp Frank, Horkheimer gave completely different reasons for this step. In a letter to Adorno, he explained that he had only allowed Neurath's "awfully boring remarks on *Lebenslagenkataster*" to be printed "because we really recognise individual politically decent acts and some professional endeavors of these people."²⁰ Through his remarks on German as the basic language of the journal, he had taken the opportunity to distance himself from this contribution (and also from that of Paul Lazarsfeld).²¹ Adorno, in turn, expressly welcomed this: the essays by Lazarsfeld and Neurath in the same issue testified to "a soundless irony." It was also "characteristic" that "the gentlemen, who certainly know less English than we do, write in English—out of sheer eagerness to adapt themselves to the new juste milieu."²² This is also interesting because Neurath wrote almost exclusively in English after his flight from Austrian fascism, which can be interpreted as both Anglophilia and explicit dissociation from National Socialism and fascism in Germany and Austria.²³

Correspondence with each other

Between the two discussion meetings in autumn 1936 in New York, Neurath wrote to Horkheimer that he would be "sincerely obliged" if he told him which of his texts he should read in preparation for the next meeting so as not to be "embarrassed" by him.²⁴ He showed himself convinced of a possible cooperation between the two intellectual groups, even if he saw "terminological discrepancies" and offered the director of the New York Institute "to transform even your most precarious turns of phrase with your help first into the general scientific language as we propagate it."²⁵ Whether this offer sounded attractive to Horkheimer remains to be seen.

After the second meeting in November 1936, Horkheimer wrote to Neurath that the two stimulating evenings had also "strengthened the desire" in

20 Max Horkheimer to Theodor W. Adorno, April 6, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:108.

21 Horkheimer to Adorno, April 6, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:108.

22 Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, May 12, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:149.

23 Günther Sandner, "The German Climate and Its Opposite: Otto Neurath in England, 1940–45," in *Political Exile and Exile Politics in Britain after 1933*, eds. A. Grenville and A. Reiter (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 67–85.

24 Otto Neurath to Max Horkheimer, November 15, 1936, in *Max Horkheimer. Gesammelte Schriften. Band 15: Briefwechsel 1913–1936*, eds. Alfred Schmidt and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1995), 725–726.

25 Neurath to Horkheimer, November 15, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:726.

him to “continue to deal with logical empiricism.”²⁶ Although he questioned Neurath’s concept of science and its form of demarcation from metaphysics, he emphasized that there was “more agreement between us” (...) “than it might at first seem.” The existing “divergences” should be “formulated in a way that we can both recognise.”²⁷ At this point, however, he had already begun working on his essay and was probably no longer thinking of a cooperation with Neurath and his circle, whose exact form had not been determined very precisely anyway.

After Neurath had read Horkheimer’s contribution in the spring issue of 1937, he first thanked him for the reprint of his English-language essay in the same issue, which he said would make it easier for him to obtain the necessary funding for a project on *Lebenslagenforschung*. Admittedly, he found Horkheimer’s arguments against logical empiricism to be “blows with a club” (“under affectionate encouragement”) and came to the conclusion that the latter wanted to “send his group to the scaffold after close examination and personal questioning.”²⁸ Neurath already contradicted Horkheimer’s arguments on some points, but did not want to go into detail yet. Instead, he suggested another meeting to clarify misunderstandings but also to record differences, where approximately the same number of representatives from each side should take part. He suggested Rudolf Carnap and Philipp Frank for “his” side and finally greeted “Pollock and the other hostile friends.”²⁹

We know about this next meeting mainly through Adorno’s letter report to Horkheimer, which is briefly discussed in the next section. Neurath finally sent his reply to Horkheimer a few months later in a letter dated December 8, 1937, referring to an agreement with him (Horkheimer) and Pollock. The tone had changed: “I would be happy to have your articles for our library, since we collect not only the separata of our friends, but also of our opponents,” Neurath wrote in the accompanying letter.³⁰ “Hostile friends” had thus become opponents, and cooperation with opponents was now probably ruled out from this side as well. Neurath was a passionate letter writer, who as a rule corresponded much more voluminously than his respective counterparts. Very often he interspersed personal remarks even in a professional context, always sought dialogue despite his steadfastness in content and signed his letters with self-drawn, always slightly varied elephants. For this reason, it is particularly noteworthy how concisely and distantly he formulated his letter to Horkheimer.

26 Max Horkheimer to Otto Neurath, November 24, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:743.

27 Horkheimer to Neurath, November 24, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:744.

28 Otto Neurath to Max Horkheimer, June 21, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:178.

29 Neurath to Horkheimer, June 21, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:179.

30 Otto Neurath to Max Horkheimer, December 8, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:319.

In his reply, Horkheimer positively emphasized the “lack of bitterness” that characterized Neurath’s “reply” and also noted “a certain agreement in our aims.” Somewhat patronizingly, he mentioned Neurath’s “statistical pictorial technique,” which could “provide highly valuable services,” but noted how “affected” he was when the latter turned to ideological questions—he could not call this philosophy at all. “There you are just as perceptive, but infinitely more limited than usual.”³¹ He did not want to know anything about publishing a reply of Neurath’s, especially since the journal would be “no platform for mutually contradictory views.”³² Instead, he suggested to Neurath that he publish his reply in *Erkenntnis*. This was the joint journal of the Ernst Mach Association and the Berlin Group for Scientific Philosophy, which at that time could only be published in Germany under difficult conditions for political reasons, and shortly afterwards not at all.³³

In a January 12, 1938 letter, Neurath finally insisted that the article be published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* and stated that he had already agreed on the publication date with Pollock. A refusal was “out of the question.”³⁴ Horkheimer, on the other hand, summed up in his reply that he had written an essay against Neurath’s “philosophy,” “which in your opinion is miserable, in my opinion not quite so miserable,” and stressed that he had shown both in the essay and by publishing Neurath’s work in the same issue that “I have the highest respect for your research as well as for your attitude.”³⁵ It should at least be mentioned that this highest respect is not compatible with his remark to Adorno on this very essay (“awfully boring remarks,” which had explicitly not been included in the issue because of its quality of content). He again refused to publish Neurath’s reply. What finally followed was certainly one of Neurath’s shortest letters ever: “Dear Mr. Horkheimer! Please send me my manuscript. Yours sincerely, Otto Neurath.”³⁶

How little interest Horkheimer had in a contradictory exchange was also shown by the fact that he not only rejected Neurath’s reply, but also a contribution by Emil Walter—an acquaintance of Neurath’s and fellow campaigner in the unity of science movement—who also criticized Neurath, but above all contradicted Horkheimer’s critique of logical empiricism.³⁷

31 Max Horkheimer to Otto Neurath, December 29, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:348.

32 Horkheimer to Neurath, December 29, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:348.

33 Reinhard Hegselmann and Günter Siegart, “Zur Geschichte der Erkenntnis,” *Erkenntnis* 35 (1991): 461-471.

34 Otto Neurath to Max Horkheimer, January 12, 1938, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:365.

35 Max Horkheimer to Otto Neurath, January 30, 1938, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:373-374.

36 Otto Neurath to Max Horkheimer, February 21, 1938, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:395.

37 Günther Sandner, *Otto Neurath. Eine politische Biographie* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 2014), 250.

Correspondence about each other

At the time of the dispute with the emigrated members of the Vienna Circle, Adorno was in Oxford for study purposes. Like Neurath a few years later, he lived on Banbury Road. It was also during this time that the plans to bring Adorno to New York and integrate him into the Institute's work there took concrete shape. In autumn 1937, Horkheimer and Adorno—who was about eight years younger—switched to addressing each other by their first names (“Dear Teddie,” “Dear Max”). Their correspondence at this time was characterized by admiration and esteem, and the mutual assurance that they were pursuing a common intellectual project that had to be resolutely defended and enforced against their opponents. These opponents could—politically speaking—be on the wrong side, but also on the “right” side. What is striking is the extremely polemical, sometimes sarcastic tone towards third parties. If someone else was given the task of reviewing writings critically evaluated by the two in the Institute's journal, then they had to “forego the sadistic pleasure” of “literally murdering” the authors in question.³⁸ Mannheim, whom Adorno was working on at this time, was “simply stupid,”³⁹ indeed he told Horkheimer of the “violence of his stupidity,” he simply wanted to “let him talk and destroy him with the quotation.”⁴⁰ The Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinger, in turn, was “an opponent of fascism,” but his book was the “epitome of naïve professorial claptrap,” which belonged to “that sort of well-meaning literature,” “with which we should clean up,” Horkheimer said again. They should also use their “independence to mark the filth as such even when it comes from that side.”⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, on the other hand, who was after all an employee of the Institute, we must imagine, according to Adorno, as a “Wandervogel gone mad.”⁴² The examples could go on.

Interestingly, the problem of scientific philosophy or positivism was always talked down, despite considerable intellectual effort. For example, Horkheimer wrote to Adorno that, in addition to this essay, he wanted to deal “with a much more urgent theoretical problem” (about the dialectical interpretation of the relation of substructure and superstructure).⁴³ “I have now

38 Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, June 25, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:570.

39 Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, December 15, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:788.

40 Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, February 28, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:60.

41 Max Horkheimer to Theodor W. Adorno, February 4, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:452.

42 Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, March 21, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:499.

43 Max Horkheimer to Theodor W. Adorno, November 14, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:721-722.

finished the work very quickly because it is basically not worth spending too much time on it," he then wrote to him after its completion.⁴⁴

At the first meeting with the "positivists" in October, Horkheimer thought he had observed a "miserable rearguard action of the formalist epistemology of liberalism," "which also in this field passes over into open lovemaking against fascism." It was a "pre-stabilised harmony between specialist science and barbarism."⁴⁵ Adorno thus agreed with Horkheimer when he diagnosed logical positivism as "a desperate retreat of bourgeois philosophy." He had already sketched out in relative detail to the director of the Institute how the essay should be argued and, after a few remarks on topics and structure, recommended treating "the better ones, like Russell and Whitehead and also Moore" and not, for example, the "morons à la Carnap [sic] and Schlick."⁴⁶ Horkheimer did not subscribe to this selection principle, but elsewhere he summarized his political assessment of positivist philosophy and its representatives, who for him were nothing other than "genuine petit bourgeois."⁴⁷ "The identification of this abstract moment of exactitude, which on closer inspection proves to be its opposite, with the concept of truth in general is only the transfiguration of the silence of these last liberals, with which they sanction and help to spread further the horror that has come into the world through their totalitarian successors."⁴⁸ Petty-bourgeois liberals, who on the one hand reinforce the social status quo and prevent social progress, but who on the other hand pave the way for fascism, even come to terms with it.

In any case, political allies look different. In fact, many of the members of the Vienna Circle—in addition to Neurath, for example, the already mentioned Philipp Frank and Rudolf Carnap—had a clearly left-wing political profile. The concept of a left-wing in the Vienna Circle has long been established in research.⁴⁹ The term "liberals" does not seem very appropriate and is not correct for those involved in the dialogue. Neurath's politically effective work extended to numerous fields: from political economy, in which he emerged as one of the most important socialization theorists after the First World War, to workers' education and pictorial statistics. In the years of Red Vienna, he published regularly in left-wing, social democratic newspapers and journals.⁵⁰ That someone like him, who was driven out of Austria by the

44 Max Horkheimer to Theodor W. Adorno, February 22, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:48.

45 Max Horkheimer to Theodor W. Adorno, October 22, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:689.

46 Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, November 28, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:761.

47 Max Horkheimer to Theodor W. Adorno, February 22, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:48.

48 Max Horkheimer to Theodor W. Adorno, December 8, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:770.

49 Thomas Uebel, "Political Philosophy of Science in Logical Empiricism: The Left Vienna Circle," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 36 (2005): 754-773.

50 Günther Sandner, "Science and Socialism: Otto Neurath as a Political Writer (1919–

Austro-Fascist regime and had to flee from Holland a second time to escape the National Socialists, should have prepared the totalitarian ideology of his persecutors is nevertheless difficult to comprehend.

In a letter to Karl August Wittfogel, another facet of the dispute becomes clear. Horkheimer and Adorno repeatedly refer to the rising popularity of scientific philosophy in the United States, especially among “enlightened students who, for understandable reasons, want to have nothing to do with metaphysics” but who would be “confused by this sophistry” and believe it to be “the only anti-metaphysical school of thought.”⁵¹ His remark to Adorno after he had finished the essay was also in line with this. Horkheimer wrote of a “mumbo-jumbo of unified science, encyclopaedism, unified language, etc.,” of “thin phrases” that were “made into a panacea in a genuinely obsessive neurotic manner” and of a “spell” that was “ultimately aimed at academic positions and chairs.”⁵²

In intellectual discourse, Adorno and Horkheimer liked to look down on others, emphasizing that their attention alone honored them. Mannheim, for example, reported Horkheimer as being “quite sincerely” pleased to be noticed by people like them, and he congratulated Adorno on the “mastery” of his “polemics.”⁵³ Adorno commented in a very similar way on the Paris meeting with the group around Neurath: the latter had merely demonstrated how “they are pleased to have been taken seriously by us at all,” since “they do not want to spoil it with us at any price for reasons of academic business.”⁵⁴

Neurath believed, especially in the period before Horkheimer’s essay, that there was a great willingness to cooperate on the other side, and he tried to involve Philipp Frank and Rudolf Carnap, in particular, in the intellectual exchange. Neither was particularly informed in social science, and they knew little or nothing of the exiled representatives of the Frankfurt Institute. Neurath wrote to Carnap after the two meetings in October and November 1936 that there was “great interest in our cause in the Horkheimer seminar.” He told him that the director of the Institute wanted to invite him (Carnap) and pay his travel and accommodation expenses. He said that Carnap should accept this and that he would also invite other companions who were friends of his, “so that we do not sit isolated in the electric chair when Horkheimer lovingly criticises us

1933),” in *Neurath Reconsidered: New Sources and Perspectives*, eds. Jordi Cat and Adam Tamas Tuboly (Cham: Springer, 2019), 67–87.

51 Max Horkheimer to Alexander Wittfogel, December 8, 1936, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15:777.

52 Max Horkheimer to Theodor W. Adorno, February 22, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:48–49.

53 Max Horkheimer to Theodor W. Adorno, February 22, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:51–52.

54 Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, August 7, 1937, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16:210.

with his friends.”⁵⁵ He used almost the same formulation as he had used towards Horkheimer after the latter’s anti-positivist essay, which can also be taken as an indication that he was playing with his cards on the table.

“Who is Horkheimer? I suppose someone in the New School of Social Research. And what is his journal in which he wants to treat our whole movement?” were Carnap’s clueless questions in his reply letter.⁵⁶ Neurath enlightened him and added that Horkheimer was writing “something about us” and Carnap could in turn “influence him in the sense of higher truth.”⁵⁷ However, since Horkheimer’s contribution was completed shortly afterwards, the possibilities of influence were probably already extremely limited at this point. Carnap was finally unable to come to New York for health reasons,⁵⁸ which Neurath at least regretted very much. Even after the publication of Horkheimer’s contribution, Neurath tried to include Philipp Frank in the discourse, even in response to his critical request.⁵⁹

In any case, we do not find internal polemics against the other side’s discussants, which are strikingly different from the qualifications used in direct epistolary exchanges in Neurath’s work. Only after the end of the intellectual encounter was he to find somewhat clearer words against critical theory and its dialectics in letters to Kurt Grelling.⁶⁰

Polemics and the end of dialogue

Andreas Droschel’s assessment that polemical texts emerge “when dialogue has broken down”⁶¹ would have to be modified in our example. For Horkheimer was already writing his polemical text while at the same time conducting a dialogue with Neurath about cooperation—and exchanging even more polemical views with Adorno about Neurath, his group, and their ideological-philosophical program simultaneously.

But where did this polemic come from, and why did the dispute become so exclusionary and ultimately lead to the “severance of diplomatic relations”⁶²?

55 Otto Neurath to Rudolf Carnap, December 22, 1936, in *Rudolf Carnap/Otto Neurath. Briefwechsel*, trans. Johannes Friedl and Ulf Höfer (FWF, 2022), 692, <https://doi.org/10.48666/872268>.

56 Rudolf Carnap to Otto Neurath, December 28, 1936, *Carnap/Neurath Briefwechsel*, 694.

57 Otto Neurath to Rudolf Carnap, January 24, 1937, *Carnap/Neurath Briefwechsel*, 703.

58 Rudolf Carnap to Otto Neurath, January 27, 1937, *Carnap/Neurath Briefwechsel*, 706.

59 Dahms, *Positivismustreit*, 182-186.

60 Dahms, *Positivismustreit*, 173-174.

61 Andreas Droschel, “Polemik und Schadenfreude,” *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 13, no. 3 (2019): 117-122, 120.

62 Dahms, *Positivismustreit*, 174.

Apart from undoubtedly existing and by no means insignificant philosophical differences, the stylistics and tone of voice point to other issues.

Horkheimer and Adorno saw the “positivists” as endangering their role as a critical, intellectual avant-garde, which they also wanted to be in the United States. European academics like Rudolf Carnap and Philipp Frank met with a positive response there and were eventually to establish themselves. Otto Neurath’s activities around unity of science (the encyclopedia as well as the congresses), but also his visual language Isotype, were also relatively widely received, including in leading print media. The fact that they were socialist-oriented refugees from fascism and National Socialism, threatened with persecution for political reasons and because of anti-Semitism, did not make matters any better. The “positivists”—even if, with the exception of Neurath, they had no social science profile—stood for a program of social progress and modern science, which Horkheimer and Adorno probably interpreted as competition, also in regard to university and academic spheres of influence.

This, too, prevented a longer-term, well-founded, and conflicting intellectual exchange that certainly would not have made differences and opposites disappear, but could have brought mutual inspiration and stimulation. Cooperation—in whatever form—would certainly not have been easy, even in view of philosophical differences. However, the chosen form of confrontation, polemics, shows that the interest in such cooperation was not present on either side at all. Above all, the polemical criticism of logical empiricism facilitated the rejection of cooperation, because the presentation of the other side in the form of polemics prevented the view of what was common. Polemics, it can be concluded, eventually destroyed possible alliances.

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