Rhetorical affects and critical intentions

A response to Ben Gregg

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In the mid-1970s at the height of the so-called "terrorist hunt" West German conservatives argued that Critical Theory from Horkheimer to Habermas was indirectly responsible for political terrorism because it corroded the rationality and legitimacy of existing society through its doctrines. The opponents of critical theory made it seem as if an unbroken logic led from rational criticism to political violence and terror. If I am not mistaken, in our days Critical Theory is accused of a new kind of terrorism – the "terrorism" of reason and of the rational. This kind of terrorism need not resort to action and to violence against things and persons to make its point. According to postmodernists like Richard Rorty and Jean-François Lyotard, the privileging of one language-game over others, the articulation of a "grand narrative" of modernity and Enlightenment, the insistence that critical thought reveal the normative principles in the name of which it speaks, are instances of the terrorism of the rational. Such a rationality does not allow the heteronomous, the discontinuous, the agonistic, in short, the diverse language-games and their small narratives to remain as they are and to enjoy their proper legitimacy.

Ben Gregg is certainly no postmodernist critic of critical theory and of Habermas. However, his assumption that any defense of the paradigm shift in critical theory from instrumental to communicative reason does "violence" to the Hegelian-Marxist tradition and to early critical theory is reminiscent of recent postmodernist denunciations of the terror of the rational. Gregg's major discontent with my treatment of this paradigm shift is indicated by the rhetorical subtitle of his review: "Must a History of Philosophy be a Philosophy of History?" He identifies the "violence" that such a philosophy of history does to its object as follows: "The main
weakness of *Critique, Norm and Utopia* should by now be clear: it tends toward being a *Geschichtsphilosophie* with Habermas as the immanent telos of critical normative philosophy since Hegel." If this were indeed the case, if my presentation of the tradition of critical theory triumphed with Habermas at the end as the new "World Spirit on horseback," Gregg would be correct. The terrorism of the rational would then consist in viewing past developments in the critical Marxist tradition as so many paths leading to Habermas's triumphant march. But this is a serious misrepresentation of my intentions in *Critique, Norm and Utopia* — serious enough indeed to have occasioned this response.

Gregg can accuse me of presenting the history of theories as a crypto-philosophy of history because he confuses the method of presentation I follow with substantive assumptions about the philosophy of history that I denounce. At the beginning of his review Gregg identifies my methodology as "the presentation of the history of theories from a systematic point of view," and describes this procedure as "the reconstruction of continuities and breaks in the 'evolution' of theories within a given intellectual tradition... toward identifying systematic problems and developing alternative strategies to overcome its immanent problems, rescuing a thinker's intentions, now reinterpreted, from a framework precluding their realization." Although this is a fair characterization of the method of presentation I follow, the phrase the "'evolution' of theories," can be — and I think in Gregg's case has been — seriously misleading. Such evolution would imply that traditions of thought were more continuous and homogeneous than they in fact are, and that a later theory is in some sense an "advance" or an improvement over an "earlier" one. Although I believe that "learning processes" in some weak sense take place in theoretical traditions (Critical Theorists have learned from Marx's critique of Hegel), and that a future theory, because it attempts to surpass the mistakes of the earlier ones, can register a gain in rationality in this respect (Habermas's treatment of the problem of ethics, when compared to Horkheimer and Adorno, involves such a learning process), my goal in *Critique, Norm and Utopia* was not to argue that Hegel and Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer were theorists of communicative rationality *malgré eux*. My aim was not to place these thinkers along an evolutionary continuum in some Popperian "third world" (would it not be silly to argue that just because it is later in time *Negative Dialectics* surpasses the *Phenomenology of Spirit*?), but to show the existence of tensions, problems, and aporias in their thought resulting from their subscription to the work model of action and the philosophy of the subject. As I note in the introduction, "From Marx to Horkheimer, the vi-