Whilst proximities between pragmatism and critical theory have been noted by several scholars, no attempt has been made so far to provide an all-encompassing philosophical interpretation of critical theory's appraisal of pragmatist themes. Through an overview of critical theory's engagement with American pragmatism in the works of Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rahel Jaeggi, I provide a theoretical framework explaining the theoretical underpinning of such a project. Via the historical reconstruction of the ways in which pragmatist themes have been appropriated, I want to show that faced with major theoretical shortcomings in the works of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, their successors have generally resorted to pragmatists in the search for more promising solutions. This trend has concerned two major areas of critical theory: the methodological foundation of a critical theory of society and the identification of the political conditions under which social emancipation is possible. I contend that with respect to both themes a steady process of progressive pragmatization of the Frankfurt school of critical theory has been going on for more than half a century, and I contend that this project needs to be further completed if the threats of “normative defeatism” Habermas diagnosed in Horkheimer's and Adorno's later works is to be superseded once and for all.
A n intense dialogue has been going on for more than fifty
years within the Frankfurt School about the proper place of
pragmatism, whose stakes have become unmistakably clear
with the recent publication of Axel Honneth's *Freedom's Right*, a book
that in important ways achieves the pragmatizing project begun by
Jürgen Habermas half a century ago.\(^1\) This process has then been
further advanced in the last decade by Rahel Jaeggi, who has resorted
to John Dewey's theory of inquiry to develop a critical theory of
forms of life.\(^2\) This process or progressive pragmatization is
theoretically complex and by no means episodic, as it invests two
dimensions that are right at the core of critical theory's philosophical
project.\(^3\) On the one hand, pragmatist ideas are mobilized to
overcome epistemological problems left unsolved in Theodor
Adorno and Max Horkheimer's work, concerning the
methodological foundation of a critical theory of society. On the
other hand, critical theorists have resorted to pragmatism to solve
the equally crucial and pressing question of the political conditions
under which social emancipation is possible in the historical
circumstances of the contemporary (post WWII) world. On this
point, too, John Dewey and, more broadly, pragmatists, have offered
critical theorists normative resources to overcome the dead end to
which first generation critical theory had arrived. Whilst from
critical theory's standpoint this process may be described in the terms
of a canonization of Dewey as a critical theorist, in this paper I
contend that this process, correctly understood, should be seen
instead as determining a progressive pragmatization of critical theory
itself.

\(^1\) Previous versions of this paper have been presented at my seminar on
Emancipation and social progress (EHESS, April 2017) as well as at a conference
on pragmatism organized at the Hochschule für Philosophie in Munich by Michael
Reder and Lisa Herzog (May 9th, 2017). I thank all the participants as well as Just
Serrano and an anonymous reviewer of this journal for their helpful comments.

\(^2\) Jaeggi (2014).

\(^3\) A third dimension, which I will not explore in this paper, concerns Habermas'
and Honneth's appropriation of G. H. Mead's theory of the self, as it plays a less
strategic function in this process of progressive pragmatization. I have discussed
this aspect in details in Frega (2015a).
Whilst Honneth is more explicit than Habermas in connecting the renaissance of the Frankfurt School to the adoption of methodological and epistemological premises directly taken from the American tradition of pragmatism, pragmatist themes permeate the theoretical outlooks of both authors. Habermas and Honneth’s reception of pragmatism is historically connected with their critical assessment of the historical trajectory of the Frankfurt School. Indeed, they both contend that the project begun with Horkheimer and culminating in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has largely exhausted its resources, so that a new starting point has to be searched for elsewhere. In particular, Habermas and Honneth see in their predecessors’ understanding of rationality as a totalizing process of domination the major obstacle to the development of a viable critical theory of society as well as to the renovation of a contemporary program of social emancipation. While pragmatist authors are by no means the only theoretical references of this project, pragmatist themes play a decisive role. Indeed, what is at stake in critical theory’s recovery of pragmatism is nothing less than the attempt to redeem normativity from the reductionistic interpretation that ensued from the instrumental interpretation of rationality developed by their predecessors.

As Habermas and Honneth have explained, within the framework of a reductive conception of rationality as instrumental reason, the ideas of autonomy and emancipation lose their meaning, and the very possibility of human progress falls into pieces. Habermas has spoken to this extent of a “normative defeatism”$^4$ to signify the failure at explaining how norms can embody a claim to validity while remaining entangled with facticity, a concern which lies at the heart of critical theory’s program throughout its history. Indeed, Habermas’ and Honneth’s major indictment against their predecessors is that, particularly in their later writings, they have abandoned the core assumptions upon which only a critical theory of society can be built, that is to say the idea that the normative resources of critique must be found within the social reality that becomes the object of critique itself. Indeed, the reconstructive

$^4$ Habermas (1996), 330.
methodology first designed by Habermas and further developed by Honneth\(^5\) appears then to be incompatible with Horkheimer and Adorno’s method of “totalizing critique,”\(^6\) while it finds a much more promising predecessor in John Dewey’s theory of philosophical reconstruction.\(^7\)

Explaining the sharp discontinuity introduced by Habermas within the history of the Frankfurt School in terms of his own reception of pragmatism has, therefore, far-reaching theoretical consequences that haven’t been fully explored yet.\(^8\) My claim in this paper is that to understand the philosophical implications of this pragmatizing move we need to distinguish at least two major dimensions through which it has been accomplished. On the one hand, pragmatism has provided critical theorists with more adequate and solid theoretical foundations for the project of a critical theory of society. To this extent, the pragmatist epistemology of inquiry, with its fallibilist assumptions, has provided a welcoming theoretical framework within which a model of immanent critique could be reformulated. On the other hand, pragmatism has offered critical theorists a positive normative model of political emancipation, under the guises of a theory of democracy that from Hegel to Adorno is nowhere to be found. The consequences of Habermas’ and Honneth’s progressive adoption of a pragmatist standpoint, later endorsed also by Jaeggi, are such that one can indeed speak of a progressive pragmatization of the Frankfurt School, one that is not complete yet. Whether these three authors got their pragmatism right is not the topic of this paper.\(^9\) Here I am mainly concerned with the fact that at

\(^5\) See Gaus (2013).

\(^6\) Habermas (1987), 120.

\(^7\) For a more nuanced appreciation of the similarities and differences between pragmatism and first generation critical theory, see Brunkhorst (2014); Hetzel (2008). As Hauke Brunkhorst correctly points out, particularly the philosophy of the young Max Horkheimer shared important assumptions with American Pragmatism, that tended however to disappear in his later work.

\(^8\) Among the works discussing the relations between Habermas and pragmatism, see in particular Aboulafia (2002); Antonio (1989); Shijun (2006).

\(^9\) I have explored this topic elsewhere. See in particular Frega (2012a, 2013a, 2013b, 2015a). Reserved views about Habermas’ pragmatism have been expressed, among others, by Hans Joas in Joas (1992) and several of the authors that have contributed
key points in the evolution of their thought, they have turned to pragmatism to solve crucial theoretical problems they have inherited from the tradition to which they belong. The question this paper asks is therefore what philosophical conclusions are we entitled to draw from this fact? What are the major philosophical consequences of this process of deep pragmatization? Answering this question requires the adoption of a historical orientation, one that helps us see the commonalities in the use of pragmatism within this tradition. This perspective shows by what arguments Frankfurt’s main representatives have resorted to pragmatism to solve which problems for which their own tradition did not possess the appropriate theoretical resources. While not engaging directly in a pragmatist critique of critical theory – something I have done elsewhere, I contend that this process of progressive pragmatization cannot be stopped and needs on the contrary to be further radicalized if one wants to achieve the theoretical goals Habermas and his successors have set for themselves. The paper is divided into three major parts, each one dealing with one of the three authors mentioned.

Jürgen Habermas’ Pragmatization of Critical Theory

Already in Knowledge and Human Interest, Habermas pointed out that pragmatist epistemology provides a reliable source to rethink the place of interest in the pursuit of knowledge, a theme that spans the tradition of critical theory from Karl Marx to today. Although the main target of that text was the German tradition spanning from Kant to Freud – here Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno are barely mentioned – Habermas’ text is clearly motivated by the will to go beyond his predecessors’ attempted (and failed) critique of positivism. Indeed, whereas Horkheimer believed that “positivism and pragmatism identify philosophy with scientism,”10 Habermas’

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10 Horkheimer (1974), 31. Referring to both philosophical movements, Horkheimer contended that “reason has become completely harnessed to the social process. Its operational value, its role in the domination of men and nature, has been made the sole criterion” Horkheimer (1974), 15.
move will consist precisely in playing pragmatism against positivism and, at a later stage, in playing pragmatism against Horkheimer and Adorno themselves. Habermas’ reservation against his predecessors, still veiled and indirect in 1971, will be reformulated in more explicit terms in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.\(^{11}\)

Since the beginning, the relation between pragmatism and critical theory is tied to the epistemological search for a conception of reason capable of reconciling rationality with autonomy, the mastery of nature with the search for truth. While the first generation of Frankfurt critical theorists contended that this project was doomed, and that Weber’s gloomy predictions could not be escaped, Habermas sets on an ambitious research program aimed at rescuing our intellectual powers from such a fated destiny. It is within this theoretical framework that he turns to the theory of rationality as inquiry developed by Charles S. Peirce and further developed by John Dewey, which he sees as better suited to this task.\(^ {12}\) Habermas’ long lasting dialogue with pragmatism does not stop here, as his uninterrupted dialogue with pragmatism has had significant impact in at least three other major dimensions of his thought. On the one hand, he has systematically relied on George H. Mead’s views to develop his own conception of communicative intersubjectivity. On the other hand, thanks in particular to a dialogue entertained with Hilary Putnam in the 1990’s, he has at least partially succeeded in overcoming his Kantian transcendentalism.\(^ {13}\) Whilst traces of transcendentalism will never be removed from Habermas’ theoretical framework, the partial de-

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\(^{11}\) Habermas (1987). See in particular Chapter 5, devoted to a radical criticism of Horkheimer and Adorno’s philosophical project. See also Honneth (2003) for a reconstruction of this evolution.

\(^ {12}\) As I contend in Frega (2013b), Habermas could but fail at grasping this point, as his reception of pragmatist themes is entirely inscribed in a dualistic theory of reason, whereas pragmatists aimed precisely at providing a unified account of reason, one that could reconcile instrumentality and communication within a single integrated notion of human intelligence.

\(^ {13}\) See Habermas (1999). I discuss the limits of Habermas’ detranscendentalization and explain how his earlier Kantianism prevents him from pursuing more consistently the project of pragmatization in Frega (2013b).
transcendentalization accomplished at this time has helped to make his “Kantian pragmatism”\textsuperscript{14} more compatible with pragmatist epistemology. Thirdly, in his political philosophy he has relied on Dewey’s theory of publics to update his conception of the public sphere.

Bridging the historical gap separating the tradition of critical theory from that of Anglo-American political philosophy, Habermas has radically transformed the normative content of critical theory by creating a legitimate place for a critical theory of society whose aim is to provide guidance for projects of social reform aimed at increasing the legitimacy of democratic political institutions, which, against his predecessors, he has ceased to consider as mere epiphenomena of a bureaucratic and totalizing reason, or as mere instruments of class domination. Hence, in significant discontinuity with his predecessors and with the decisive support of pragmatism, Habermas will have succeeded in reconciling the negative program of a critique of capitalism with the positive project of a theory of democracy, or this is at least what he has attempted to do.

### Pragmatizing the Anthropology of Knowledge

Habermas’ first encounters with pragmatism are owed to his friendship with Karl-Otto Apel, who introduced him to Peirce’s philosophy while they were students.\textsuperscript{15} Since its inception, Habermas saw pragmatism as a productive force capable of mediating the two competing strands of empiricist analytical philosophy and the continental tradition. Indeed, Habermas seems to be torn between the science-like proceedings of Anglo-American philosophy-science as developed by analytic philosophy, and the social account of knowledge stemming from the German tradition. He seems unwilling to give up either of these approaches, and in the search for

\textsuperscript{14} See Bernstein (2010) for a perceptive discussion of the extent to which Habermas’ Kantianism is compatible with pragmatism. I have expressed my own reservations to Bernstein’s interpretation in Frega (2011).

\textsuperscript{15} Habermas (1971), vii.
a third way capable of reconciling the analytic account of epistemic validity with the German understanding of the social and material basis of knowledge, he turns to American pragmatism, and particularly to Peirce’s epistemology.

Habermas’ concern with epistemology from the early 1960s until the late 1990s is inscribed in a larger reflection on the nature and conditions of possibility of a form of social theorizing that can promote social emancipation. This exigency is summed up in the claim that today “[a] radical critique of knowledge is possible only as social theory.”16 While Habermas is aware that this description fits the task of critical theory since at least the time of Marx, he is nevertheless persuaded that this project has lately been threatened by its excessive radicalization at the hands of his own mentors and predecessors, Horkheimer and Adorno. As he will remind us in the mid 1980s, the critique of reason undertaken by these two authors since the late 1940s is so uncompromising that “[o]n their analysis, it is no longer possible to place hope in the liberating force of enlightenment.”17 Nor, on the other hand, to appraise the self-standing value of human knowledge.

While Habermas shares Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s diagnosis that modern life and capitalist economy threaten to reduce knowledge validity to instrumental efficacy,18 he nevertheless criticizes them for having failed to see that modernity harbors counter tendencies capable of resisting this totalizing process. As he explains, “[t]he Dialectic of Enlightenment does not do justice to the rational content of cultural modernity [...]. I am thinking here of the specific theoretical dynamic that continually pushes the sciences [...] I am referring, further, to the universalistic foundations of law and morality [...] I have in mind, finally, the productivity and explosive power of basic aesthetic experiences that a subjectivity liberated from the imperatives of purposive activity and from conventions of quotidian perception gains from its own decentering.”19 Moreover,

16 Habermas (1971), vii.
17 Habermas (1987), 106.
18 Habermas (1987), 113.
19 Habermas (1987), 113.
as Habermas notes, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* “[t]he suspicion of ideology [...] is turned not only against the irrational function of bourgeois ideals, but against the rational potential of bourgeois culture itself.”²⁰ From this totalizing perspective, the very possibility of a normative reconstruction aimed at finding within society the normative resources to criticize its present shortcomings becomes impossible. The idea of the self-destructive process of reason defended by Horkheimer and Adorno amounts for Habermas to a performative contradiction that destroys its own basis: having abandoned the very idea of valid conditions independent from human interest, critical theory is forced to renounce its own theoretical ambitions.

This theoretical as well as practical dead end is a daunting legacy from which Habermas tries to escape, whilst seeking not to lose track of the philosophical project of an anthropology of knowledge to which he subscribes. On the one hand, Habermas wants to remain faithful to the idea that an adequate account of knowledge cannot be produced on purely epistemic terms, that is to say along the lines laid bare by logical empiricism, positivism, and analytical philosophy. He insists in particular on the necessity of a naturalistic account capable of inscribing the search for knowledge in the wider context of human life. On this point, he fully endorses the anthropological critique of knowledge developed in the tradition spanning from Marx to Adorno. On the other hand, he wants to resist the materialist reduction of knowledge’s claim to validity to external conditions. He searches, therefore, for a theoretical middle ground on which the notions of interest and knowledge can be reconciled, aiming at showing, in other terms, that human knowledge can be at the same time interested and valid, motivated by human being’s entanglements with the world and endowed with independent autonomy. Seeing that positivism on the one hand and critical theory on the other have failed at reconciling these two dimensions of human knowledge, Habermas will find in pragmatism’s naturalist epistemology a more promising avenue for rethinking the place and nature of reason and knowledge.

²⁰ Habermas (1987), 119.
Habermas can therefore see in Peirce's epistemology the first historically successful attempts at reconciling knowledge and interest within a theory of science that does not expel interest from the process whereby valid knowledge is produced. Habermas’ reliance on Peirce’s epistemology to ground his own anthropology of knowledge is unsurprising, as pragmatists – particularly Peirce and Dewey – wished indeed to reconcile a naturalistic and action-theoretic account of human reason as a method for the fixation of beliefs, with a more realistic understanding of truth as the autonomous norm of scientific discourse. To that extent, one can easily conclude that pragmatism and critical theory share a naturalistic view of knowledge, which for both traditions becomes the starting point for the refusal of purely representational conceptions of knowledge, so that an anti-Cartesian stance unifies pragmatists and critical theorists. Whilst indeed Peirce's most famous papers are known as “anti-Cartesians” and while Dewey defined his own epistemology as a reaction against the “spectator theory of knowledge,” Habermas sees in positivism’s “copy theory of truth” its most distinctive mark, against which Knowledge and Human Interests (1971) is written.

As Habermas correctly points out, Peirce combines a social account of knowledge with a solid conception of truth. He does this through the idea of truth as intersubjective consensus produced by the cooperative work of the scientific community of inquiry. As Habermas notes, “[a]s the sum total of all possible predicates appearing in true statements about reality, reality is no longer determined by the constitutive activities of a transcendental consciousness per se but by what is in principle a finite process of inferences and interpretations, namely the collective efforts of all those who ever participate in the process of inquiry.”

The community of inquiry as a social group replaces the transcendental ego of modern philosophy. The upshot is that Peirce inscribes the search for truth in the concrete proceedings of a socially constituted community of inquiry: “for Peirce this concept of truth is not

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21 Habermas (1971), 91.
22 Habermas (1971), 101.
derivable merely from the logical rules of the process of inquiry, but rather only from the objective life context in which the process of inquiry fulfills specifiable functions: the settlement of opinions, the elimination of uncertainties, and the acquisition of unproblematic beliefs—in short, the fixation of belief.” 23 Habermas praises Peirce for having inscribed the search for knowledge in the context of human action and for having connected the epistemic validity of scientific propositions to the behavioral system of purposive-rational action, insofar as he conceives beliefs as guides for action rather than as copies of reality: behavioral certainty as the successful control of action becomes the criterion of validity and beliefs remain unproblematic as long as actions undertaken under their guide do not fail. Because however “inquiry is the reflected form (Reflexionsform) of this pre-scientific learning process that is already posited with instrumental action as such,”24 it follows that knowledge, even technical knowledge, cannot be reduced to pure instrumentality.

For pragmatists as well as for Habermas, scientific discoveries indeed always have two faces: on the one hand, they fulfill life functions and have therefore a practical character or, in Habermas’ terms, they respond to an interest. On the other hand, they are endowed with independent epistemic value that emancipates their validity from the circumstances of their production. Habermas sees pragmatism’s advantage in its reconciliation of knowledge and action: action is no longer seen as mere instrumental manipulation, but conceived as a constitutive factor in the process of knowledge production. Action and knowledge are to that extent reconciled, insofar as action acquires epistemic meaning as being instrumental in the confirmation/disconfirmation of knowledge, and knowledge acquires practical value insofar as it is purposive. Action is at the same time the medium for the domination of the external world, and the vehicle for the advancement of knowledge. As such, it provides factual command of external reality while maintaining an essential connection with the epistemic dimension of validity. Contrary to

23 Habermas (1971), 119.
24 Habermas (1971), 124.
positivism, pragmatism secures an insight into knowledge aimed at technical control which clarifies its function within human experience while laying bare the conditions of its epistemic validity. Indeed, validity defined as the condition of stable beliefs is that which grants efficacy to action. Contrary to the Marx-Weber-Horkheimer critique of reason, pragmatism rescues knowledge from the reductionist’s threats engendered by its connection to action, while not severing the umbilical thread that connects it to human interest.

Scientific rationality and the knowledge-constitutive interest it represents can then be successfully inscribed in the concrete socio-technical practices of a community of inquiry which Habermas sees as the bearer of an intersubjective and no longer monological form of reasoning. The instrumental rationality that presides over technical control is therefore inscribed – and subordinated to – the communicative rationality which “arises from symbolic interaction between societal subjects who reciprocally know and recognize each other as unmistakable individuals. This communicative action is a system of reference that cannot be reduced to the framework of instrumental action.”

Peirce’s epistemology appears then as the solution capable of preserving the core intuition of the Marxian anthropology of knowledge while protecting it against interpretations that tend to autonomize and absolutize instrumental rationality. Whilst the juxtaposition of instrumental and communicative reason does not do justice to the pragmatist epistemology, Habermas is correct in seeing in Peirce’s account the attempt to inscribe the search for knowledge in a broader anthropological framework, a program of naturalization of epistemology that will be further advanced by Dewey.

From this point onward, Peirce’s epistemology rather than Horkheimer and Adorno’s theory of reason will set the framework of Habermas’ epistemology. This theoretical move is decisive insofar as no normative project could have ever been devised under the premises laid bare by Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s critique of reason. The pragmatist theory of inquiry will provide a larger background against which Habermas will develop his own theory of rationality,

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25 Habermas (1971), 137.
one that from a pragmatist standpoint is far from being unproblematic, however.26

This first step is nevertheless fundamental, insofar as the attempted reconciliation of facticity with validity, under the assumption of a constitutive relation between knowledge and human interest, provides perhaps the decisive common ground upon which the successive exchanges between pragmatism and critical theory will take place. In addition, as I now intend to show, sharing an epistemological framework will also determine what critical theory will inherit from pragmatism in social and political philosophy.

**Pragmatizing Politics**

The second turning point I want to examine concerns Habermas’ reference to pragmatism to overcome what he saw as the most significant shortcoming of his own tradition in political theory. After his writing on Legitimation Crisis, beginning from the second half of the 1970’s, Habermas begins an inquiry into the conditions under which a political regime obtains legitimacy. According to Habermas, the central problem a constitutional state must solve is how to translate communicative power as action-in-concert into the administrative power of the state. Because of their faulty epistemology, Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s political philosophies failed to provide a convincing answer to this question. Indeed, given their reductionist understanding of knowledge and reason, their totalizing critique of capitalism can provide no conceptual space within which the question of legitimacy of power can even be asked. As Habermas himself has explicitly admitted:

> [f]rom the outset I viewed American pragmatism as the third productive reply to Hegel, after Marx and Kierkegaard, as the radical-democratic branch of Young Hegelianism, so to speak. Ever since, I have relied on this American version of

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26 I have formulated my own pragmatist criticism of Habermas’ epistemology in Frega (2013b).
the philosophy of praxis when the problem arises of compensating for the weaknesses of Marxism with respect to
democratic theory.27

References to Dewey and pragmatism in Habermas’ political
philosophy are scant and yet decisive. In Between Facts and Norms,
Dewey is invoked beside J. S. Mill in chapter four,28 and then twice
again in chapter seven.29 However, implicit references to a Deweyan
approach to democratic politics traverse the entire text, and the
whole problématique of the book is shaped by the Deweyan concern of
how to combine the problem-solving orientation of the democratic
state with the credentials of democratic legitimacy.

In Deweyan terms, the solution to the problem of political
legitimacy is found in the idea of a democratic public that Habermas
further articulates in terms of a procedural understanding of the
public as a collective of citizens-deliberators which embody and enact
a communicative form of rationality.30 As he unambiguously
explains with reference to his proceduralist conception of
democracy, “no one has worked out this view more energetically
than John Dewey.”31 Here Habermas explicitly endorses what Dewey
termed “the method of democracy,” and makes it the basis of his own
understanding of legitimate politics as the process whereby a
plurality of individuals coalesce together to discuss in deliberative
ways matters of concern with the aim of finding a solution which is
legitimate because it is endowed with “a reasonable quality.”32

Whereas Habermas’ primitive model for conceptualizing
rational communication was provided by the purely discursive model
of 18th century publics of readers,33 in order to draw the full political

27 Habermas (1985), 76-77. Habermas will reassert this position nearly twenty
years later in close to identical terms. See Habermas (2002), 228.
28 Habermas (1996), 171.
29 Habermas (1996), 304 and 317.
30 The connection between Habermas and Dewey via proceduralism has been
31 Habermas (1996), 304.
32 Habermas (1996), 304.
33 Habermas (1962).
implications of this notion, Habermas will later resort to the idea of a community of citizens that constitutes itself in the linguistic medium of deliberations that are however oriented toward action: contrary to the model of readers conversing together to form their opinion, in (Habermas, 1996) citizens are seen as deliberating together with the aim of giving shape to collective action. Habermas’ transition unfolds in two steps. He first introduces a purely discursive model of publicity as public discussion aimed at “feeding and monitoring parliament.”\(^{34}\) We can see here the priority of the legacy of Mill. Subsequently, in the second part of the book, the historical emergence of a civil society is seen by Habermas as the appropriate solution to develop a “sociological translation of the concept of deliberative politics.” With this move the discourse-based literary public sphere is finally transformed into an action-oriented pragmatist public. Democratic politics is organized according to a two-tier track model that differentiates a public sphere merely oriented to the opinion-formation through discourses, from the parliamentary bodies which are decision-oriented.\(^{35}\) A second distinction is then added between the discursive sphere where opinions are formed and justified decisions are taken, and the sphere of administrative actions where effective actions enact decisions taken elsewhere, according to a dualism of justification and application that Habermas continues to endorse.\(^{36}\)

While the dualism between communicative and instrumental rationality continues to bar Habermas from a fuller integration of pragmatist themes in his philosophy, the influence of Dewey’s theory of democracy is nevertheless unmistakable and important. Indeed, Habermas sees in Dewey’s proceduralism a model for understanding societal problem-solving as a situated practice steered through discourses among affected individuals deliberating together, rather than through systems-theoretic mechanisms.\(^{37}\) As his discussion of Bernhard Peter’s theory of social rationality makes clear, Habermas is

\(^{34}\) Habermas (1996), 171.

\(^{35}\) Habermas (1996), 307.

\(^{36}\) Habermas (1993).

\(^{37}\) On this point, see Honneth (1998).
concerned precisely with the problem of how to move from the
social-theoretic concept of a society viewed as a problem solving
system to the action-theoretic concept of social groups engaged in
processes of collective problem solving.

Habermas’ understanding of the evolution of political
systems through the lenses of systems theory exposes his account to
the risk of falling back upon an instrumentalist account of reason.
With the help of Dewey, he succeeds however in re-inflating
communicative power in the political process through the idea of
linguistically mediated cooperative practices of civil society and of
parliamentary bodies. Indeed, without the idea of a public which –
like Peirce’s community of inquiry and Mead’s generalized other –
incarnates reason in the figure of sociologically and historically
situated collectivities, Habermas would have found himself without
the necessary link between an idealized and disembodied
communication community and the blind instrumental rationality
of administrative agencies, a problem that on Habermas’ own
admission Hannah Arendt faced and never solved.39 “With the
procedural concept of democracy, however, this idea takes the shape
of a self-organizing legal community”40 and, as he further explains,
“the normative countersteering of constitutional institutions can
compensate for the communicative, cognitive, and motivational
limitations on deliberative politics and the conversion of
communicative into administrative power.”41 We can clearly see in
these passages how Dewey’s public-based theory of democracy helps
Habermas in developing an account of politics that combines systems
theory with discourse theory in a scheme that successfully accounts
for concrete processes of collective will formation. Without Dewey’s
community-based notion of proceduralism, Habermas’ political
theory would have remained ensnared in an abstract conception of
democratic legitimacy unsuited to the tasks of a critical theory of
society. The symmetry between Habermas’ usage of pragmatism in

38 Habermas (1996), 323.
40 Habermas (1996), 326.
41 Habermas (1996), 327.
his epistemology and in his political theory could not be more explicit.

While taking place in different thematic domains then, Habermas' appropriation of pragmatism is unified by a common thread, which is the emphasis on the intersubjectivity of human reason and the awareness that factuality and normativity are inextricably entangled within social practices. As I have shown throughout this section, Habermas' interest in pragmatism is mainly motivated by his own search for a viable theory of human rationality capable of explaining how knowledge's involvement with human interest and of legitimacy with power should not be seen as inevitable signs of the ineluctable march of a blind, instrumental, reductionist and destructive reason. In both cases, Habermas can see pragmatism as steering a badly needed middle ground between idealism (or positivism) and materialism. Habermas accomplishes a first pragmatizing step with the support of Peirce, which helps him in developing an anthropological standpoint from whose vantage point instrumental reason can be curbed, inscribing it within the larger framework of communicative rationality. In *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1* (1984), Mead's theory of the self will help Habermas further develop this scheme by discovering the social basis of rationality within human interaction. At a third stage, Dewey's public-based theory of democracy will be mobilized to extend Habermas' theory of rationality to the domain of politics, providing him with the idea of a communication community which relies on the intermediate strata of the civil society to steer its own destiny through the media of communicative rather than instrumental power.

**Axel Honneth's Radicalized Pragmatism**

Honneth's recovery of pragmatism follows in the footsteps of Habermas' program for the renovation of the Frankfurt School, while introducing a social twist that considerably improves on his predecessor's attempts. Whereas for Habermas the major added benefit of a pragmatization of the Frankfurt School project had to be
seen in pragmatist epistemology’s superiority in reconciling facticity with validity and instrumental with communicative rationality, Honneth emphasizes instead pragmatism’s superiority in understanding the social roots of human experience and, to that extent, of human knowledge. Honneth is also more explicit than Habermas in connecting the problem of an epistemological foundation of critical theory with that of a theory of legitimate emancipatory politics. Indeed, Honneth conceives the problem of human emancipation as unfolding at two distinct but strictly interdependent levels. On the one hand, we need to develop a critical theory of society capable of identifying the normative requirements under which the conditions of social emancipation can be determined and justified. On the other hand, contextual and specific conditions for social progress in society have to be established according to this framework. As he explained this interrelation in his first published book, “[o]nly if the emancipatory interest, which also guides critical theory at a scientific level, can already be found within social life can it justly be conceived as a reflexive moment in social evolution.”

Indeed, “[o]nly because critical theory constantly influences in an action-guiding manner the same social praxis through which it is known to have been produced is it a practically transformative moment in the social reality it investigates.”

If a critical theory of society is required to provide a legitimate basis to the emancipatory interest, a theory of democracy is then needed to provide the larger normative framework within which social progress can unfold historically. Honneth thus agrees with Habermas that neither of these two central requirements has successfully been fulfilled by the tenants of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. On the one hand, Honneth follows Habermas in contending that the reductive understanding of human rationality developed by Horkheimer and Adorno fails to deliver the normative standards that are required if social trends are to be evaluated in terms of their emancipatory value. On the other hand, Honneth criticizes Horkheimer – and even more vehemently Adorno – for

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42 Honneth (1993), xiv.
43 Honneth (1993), 14.
having failed to provide an account of the conditions under which legitimate politics can unfold. Even more explicitly than Habermas, Honneth has contended that pragmatism has indeed provided solutions to both these problems far more convincing than those that could be found in the writings of the first generation of the Frankfurt school. Through this move, Honneth brings the pragmatization of the Frankfurt school a step further, and it is in this light that we should understand the project of “normative reconstruction” that he has been pursuing systematically throughout the last three decades.

Like Habermas before him, Honneth too proceeds through a two-tier project. On the epistemological side, he wants to rescue the very idea of rationality from the totalizing critique to which Horkheimer and Adorno submitted it. He sets therefore onto a critique of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s epistemology very much in line with Habermas’, insofar as both blame their predecessors for having made the entire edifice of critical theory repose on a reductionist understanding of rationality as instrumental reason. On the political side, he wants to redeem the idea that social life – and democratic institutions within it – is endowed with an emancipatory potential that the first generation of the Frankfurt School failed to see.

As a first theoretical step in this strategy, Honneth begins by explicitly thematizing Adorno and Horkheimer’s failed attempts at developing a successful critical epistemology, noting that the resources for such a program where already available in the pragmatist tradition, a fact that at that time Frankfurt intellectuals were not ready to accept. After having noted Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s failure at adequately differentiating the theoretical bases of a critical theory of society from those of what Horkheimer called ‘traditional theory,’ he remarks that on the other hand:

Peirce or Dewey conceive the vital interests that should be integrated into the research process rather as a sort of transcendental space that, although capable of determining

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44 Honneth (2003), 63–64; 69–70.
the direction of scientific investigations, does not specify their conditions of validity. The margin thereby left by the interests that steer research should be narrowed down by means of methodic rules that reflect the consensus of inquirers with regard to scientific criteria of justification.\(^\text{45}\)

He then concludes that:

in light of the intentions both authors associate with the project of a ‘critical theory,’ the pragmatists’ suggestion would have been of the greatest importance. [...] But since both authors set pragmatism too hastily aside and altogether ignore its potential, the question that lies at the heart of their anthropology of knowledge – namely to what extent critical theory can gain a superior perspective without forfeiting its rooting in pre-scientific interests – remained without answer.\(^\text{46}\)

The second step in this pragmatizing strategy finds its starting point in the critique of Adorno’s dismissal of the very idea of social emancipation, and is achieved, to date, in Honneth’s peculiarly pragmatist rehabilitation of socialism within the framework of experimentalism.\(^\text{47}\) Already in his first published book,\(^\text{48}\) Honneth marked a critical distance from Adorno’s decision to entrust art with the emancipatory function, stigmatizing Adorno’s view of modern political institutions and of the social sciences as the product of the reifying process of instrumental rationality. This dismissive view inspired Adorno’s turn toward art – that he saw as the sole intellectual enterprise liable to escape from the iron cage of instrumental rationality – and toward artistic experience, which he saw as the only space in which human beings could realize freedom. The idea of the sciences, social sciences included, as mere

\(^{45}\) Honneth (2003), 63-64.
\(^{46}\) Honneth (2003), 64.
\(^{47}\) Honneth (2015).
\(^{48}\) Honneth (1993).
instruments of bureaucratic control and the idea of political institutions, democracy included, as instruments for the maintenance of intra-societal domination within what Horkheimer and Adorno dubbed “the authoritarian state” have been, and to a certain extent remain, important themes within the tradition of critical theory even today, and to that extent the meaning of this pragmatizing process remains contested within the tradition of critical theory itself. While following in the footsteps of Habermas’ discovery of pragmatist epistemology, Honneth goes beyond Habermas’ epistemic strategy and steadily moves from Peirce to Dewey as the main theoretical reference for appropriating pragmatist themes within critical theory.

An Epistemology of Emancipation

One of the most striking commonalities between pragmatism and the first generation Frankfurt School concerns the rejection of a received view of science that Horkheimer defined as “traditional theory” and that Dewey dubbed a “spectator theory of knowledge.” Both traditions set themselves against a Cartesian understanding of science as the quest for a detached knowledge of the external world, whose way of proceeding requires the distancing of the inquiring subject from the inquired world. Another striking commonality concerns the idea that philosophy can pursue its emancipatory interest only by opening itself to the proceedings of the – at the time newly emerging – social and political sciences. Their respective epistemologies attempted to conceptualize this elusive relation. While Honneth follows Habermas in criticizing his predecessors for having indeed failed to appreciate the manifold ways through which human interests are related to forms of knowledge, he is also

49 One could indeed claim that critical theory is today an house divided within itself, and that the contemporary renaissance of Adorno’s studies provides a challenging alternative to the pragmatizing program begun by Habermas and pursued by Honneth and, in a more ambiguous way, by Jaeggi.

50 I have examined at greater length the similarities between pragmatist and critical theory’s social philosophies in Frega (2013a).
interested in rescuing Horkheimer’s original socio-philosophical project as it unfolded in the research conducted at the *Institut für Sozialeforschung* under his direction. This perspective requires, more urgently than Habermas’, the development of an epistemology that can explain under which conditions social scientific knowledge can bear an emancipatory potential, a theme right at the heart of pragmatism’s philosophy of the social sciences.

The destinies of these two projects are, however, linked, as they share common epistemological assumptions concerning the place of reason in the pursuit of knowledge and emancipation. As Honneth notes:

> Adorno’s critique of sociology is designed for the exposition of a historical convergence of the “positivistic” concept of society and actual social development. It deals with the conviction that the conceptual framework of positivism only reflects a movement that, as a reification within the nexus of social life, is itself being completed in the processes of a coercive integration of all domains of action and a destruction of the capacity for individual identity.\(^{51}\)

Echoing Habermas’ indictment, Honneth explains that:

> [t]he idea of a self-destruction of human reason, the social-psychological concept of the loss of personality, the concept of mass culture, and the ideal of the authentic work of art are the building blocks of a theory of society that has its inner content in the central experience of the commonality of fascist and Stalinist domination. Its most prominent author is, of course, not Max Horkheimer but Theodor Adorno.\(^{52}\)

Insofar as “Adorno views the relations of domination that have become visible in his own time as a structural paradigm from the development of which the hidden logic of the whole process of

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\(^{51}\) Honneth (1993), 70.

\(^{52}\) Honneth (1993), 35.
civilization is to be read," the inevitable consequence will be that the progress of civilization can be grasped only as a process of human regression, whose central core is provided by a conception of rationality reduced to instrumental reason. An epistemology transformed into a philosophy of history becomes then the mediating factor that unites Adorno’s critique of knowledge to his political theory. The history of western modernity is understood as the history of a process of objectification: if the defining trait of humanity as a species is its tendency to objectify nature, its socio-political equivalent is the inevitable tendency of a class to objectify and dominate another. Both processes are governed by the deployment of instrumental rationality. The very possibility of an exercise of power and control not based on instrumental domination but rather on communication is a priori excluded, as the only social processes they admit are those of one class oppressing another. Symmetrically, the recourse to pragmatism has to be seen as providing a more reliable theory of reason, one that will provide a better foundation to the epistemological project of developing a critical theory of society as well as to the political project of developing a theory of emancipation as democratization.

Honneth’s indictment of the first generation differs from Habermas’ insofar as its focus shifts from the purely epistemological ground of the anthropology of knowledge to the socio-political plan of what he sees as Horkheimer and Adorno’s “definitive repression of the social.” Adorno’s critique of the social sciences and of politics are plagued by a similar failure at grasping the emancipatory potential embedded in the intermediate strata of social life – structures of social differentiation and public spheres, “pre-state domains of action in which normative convictions and cultural self-interpretations, as well as the purposive-rational deliberations of individuals, become socially effective.” The combined indictment against democracy and the social sciences – both entrapped within

54 Honneth (1993).
55 Honneth (1993), 76.
Adorno’s “traumatic picture of a totally administered society”\textsuperscript{56} – stems from the same theoretical roots. Indeed, the replacement of the original interdisciplinary social scientific study of society with a philosophy of history and the incapacity to move from a critical theory of totalitarian regimes to a positive appraisal of welfare democracy, are the equally negative consequences of the same theoretical move. The consequences of such a failure are for Honneth momentous, as the very possibility of a positive, emancipatory theory of society is expelled from the scope of critical theory. One is entitled to wonder what can be saved of a tradition whose theoretical bases are so radically shaken.

Whereas Adorno believed that only art could escape from the alienating grip of instrumental reason,\textsuperscript{57} dismissing in the same stroke the emancipatory power of the social sciences and of democratic institutions, Honneth sees in the pragmatist tradition and in the work of Habermas the conditions of possibility for an alternative and more promising program of critical theory. His pragmatization of critical theory proceeds accordingly in two steps: after having reclaimed the superiority of pragmatist epistemology as the proper basis upon which to build a critical theory of society, he draws on pragmatism to develop a theory of democracy that he sees as the political counterpart of the emancipatory project developed through a critical theory of society. Particularly in \textit{Freedom’s Right}, Honneth accomplishes this task through a process of rehabilitation of the social that, inspired by Hegel, he sees as taking place within the institutions of the “\textit{Sittlichkeit}”: the family, the market, and the state. The emphatic attention devoted by Honneth to the communicative resources he sees at work throughout the whole social body is intended as a possible way out of the theoretical impasses of Adorno and Horkheimer.

Whereas Habermas attempted to solve the riddles of instrumental rationality via a sophisticated differentiation between social systems steered by instrumental reason and a lifeworld permeated by communicative reason, Honneth proceeds through a

\textsuperscript{56} Honneth (1993), 74.
\textsuperscript{57} Honneth (1993), 68.
sociologically thicker and more sophisticated scheme, which unfortunately maintains Habermas’ dualism between instrumental and communicative reason. In ways that were however only adumbrated by his predecessor’s seminal work on the public sphere and that became fully evident in his subsequent works – particularly in The Theory of Communicative Action and in Between Facts and Norms – a public sphere steered by communicative rationality and populated by social movements bearing claims to social justice is now endowed with an emancipatory potential that Honneth will then re-describe in the updated terms of the Hegelian idea of ethical life, now actualized in a Deweyan theory of the democratic ethos. It is this idea that now takes center stage as the immanent normative ideal that best captures the emancipatory hopes and expectations raised by Western civilization in the course of the last three centuries and defines one of the three constitutive conditions for the realization of social freedom.

Recovering Dewey’s Public-based Theory of Democracy

More than Habermas, Honneth has been fascinated by pragmatism’s capacity to understand the emancipative function of everyday social interactions. Social interactions lie at the heart of social life, creating society as if from the middle, connecting individuals to macro structures. The conception of democracy stemming from this account of social life differs from Habermas’ insofar as Honneth appraises politics through the sociological categories of a theory of society rather than through those of a theory of discourses. Yet the theoretical trajectory is similar in compensating the steady reject of theoretical themes of the first generation with a massive

58 On this point Hans Joas has played for Honneth the role that Apel has played for Habermas, introducing him to a social theoretic version of pragmatism centered around the idea of an emancipatory potential embedded in the creativity of coordinated individual action Joas (1992, 1996).

59 This interaction-based social ontology is a common theme of pragmatist social theory. See for example Schubert (2006); Shalin (1986); Abbott (2016); Joas (1992); Frega (2015c).
incorporation of pragmatist intuitions. Whereas Habermas succeeds only incompletely at freeing himself from the grips of a totalizing paradigm of rationality through the dualism of the systems and the lifeworlds, Honneth goes a step further, ridding himself also of the remnants of a totalizing reason that Habermas confined to the steering function of power and money. Only on these conditions can the structuring force and the emancipatory power of social processes be affirmed.\(^{60}\) It is precisely this enhanced capacity to understand the role of social processes in the realization of what Honneth now calls “social freedom” that he sees as the decisive contribution of pragmatism, and particularly of Dewey’s theory of publics to which Honneth resorts in *Freedom’s Right* when it comes to the third stage of the ethical life. Here Honneth is forced to abandon the guiding ideas of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and turns to Dewey’s theory of democracy to identify the normative conditions within which social freedom can be achieved. As he had already done in several remarkable papers written in the course of the 1990s, in *Freedom’s Right* Honneth is engaged in rewriting the genealogy of the tradition of critical theory, relying on the triad of Emile Durkheim, John Dewey, and Jürgen Habermas to provide an account of the conditions of political legitimacy, one that is rooted in the idea of ’democratic ethos,’ and whose essential feature is provided by a revised and expanded account of the idea of the public sphere, which he projects back on Dewey’s and Durkheim’s theories of politics in order to provide it with a thicker social substance.

In *Freedom’s Right*, Honneth sets himself onto the task of describing the public sphere as an institution of social freedom. As he points out:

> Here . . . an idea of freedom was institutionalized that no longer permitted a merely individualistic interpretation. Instead, individual citizens were to achieve their new freedom to influence political legislation by forming an intersubjectively examined opinion, in discursive exchange and dispute with other citizens, about the policies to be

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\(^{60}\) Honneth (1993), Ch. 9.
implemented by elected representatives of the people.\textsuperscript{61}

This informal public sphere, rather than the formal political institutions of the democratic state, epitomizes the progress of social freedom, because it is here that the greatest attempts at creating a free space of communication take place. Dewey is credited for having conceptualized emancipatory social actions in these terms, as for Dewey “the cooperative interaction in public will-formation is both the means and the end of individual self-realization.”\textsuperscript{62} So conceived, the public sphere can fulfill the epistemic goal of informing public decisions and at the same time the social goal of creating a cooperating public collectively involved in the self-reflective process of forming his own opinion.

Honneth understands Dewey’s contribution to a theory of democracy in the terms of a revised version of Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, hence from the vantage point of a theory of collective will formation that takes place in a social public sphere opposed to the realm of the formal political institutions of the state. This view reflects Habermas two-tier model based on the epistemic division of labor between communicative and instrumental rationality, a distinction that forces both authors to conceive the public not as a collective social actor engaged in social processes of action and inquiry, but as a spectator essentially concerned with the task of forming a political opinion and hence creating and exercising communicative power. Not surprisingly, it is in the terms of a critical theory of media that Honneth interprets Dewey’s theory of the public. As he notes:

Dewey uses the term ‘democratic public’ to describe the totality of all the communicative processes that enable the members of ‘large societies’ with the help of the news media to take up the perspective of such a ‘We’ while judging the consequences of their actions.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{61} Honneth (2014), 260.
\textsuperscript{62} Honneth (2014), 269.
\textsuperscript{63} Honneth (2014), 274.
And he adds:

as soon as the media fulfill their task of providing the general knowledge required for dealing with social problems, the members of society will be capable, under conditions of equal rights to freedom and participation, to commonly explore appropriate solutions and work cooperatively toward the experimental consummation of their community.64

Honneth has certainly gone quite far in criticizing Habermas for not having:

further pursue[d] the question of how these practices of public opinion and will-formation could be socially generalized into the fragile structure of democratic nation-states in the 19th century, instead skipping ahead to the twentieth century and discovering a process in which this original social model was in the process of being hollowed out.65

He has also criticized Habermas' dualizing way of proceeding, contending that:

[i]f capitalist societies are conceived in this way as social orders in which system and lifeworld stand over against each other as autonomous spheres of action, two complementary fictions emerge: We then suppose (1) the existence of norm-free organizations of action and (2) the existence of power-free spheres of communication.66

On the one hand, the idea that market institutions are purely driven by instrumental logic is contradicted by sociological studies showing

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64 Honneth (2014), 275.
65 Honneth (2014), 283.
66 Honneth (1993), 298.
that no institution can function only on the basis of purposive rationality. On the other hand, the idea that the lifeworld is free from practices of power and domination gives rise to equally unrealistic assumptions.

Both moves reveal a more consistent advancement in the pragmatizing project, which finds however a halt in Honneth’s unwillingness to dismiss Habermas’ dualism, with its very unpalatable consequence that for Honneth too, all of our normative attention must be “turned away from state organs and directed toward the conditions of non-coercive self-legislation among citizens.”67 State institutions and public administrations remain then subjected to the instrumental rationality of power, a position which is incompatible with the pragmatist idea of democratic experimentalism. Indeed, Honneth could have easily found in Dewey the resources needed to provide a fuller account of how epistemic practices taking place at different levels of society as well as the public and private institutions of democratic experimentalism contribute to the democratization of society.68 Such an account cannot, however, be easily squared with the Habermasian two-tier model, so Honneth can only provide proper space for it in the context of social movements, particularly in his reconstruction of the socialist tradition.69 This move is, however, insufficient, and here a more thorough adoption of themes coming from Dewey’s theory of democracy would have greatly helped Honneth to avoid these troubles.

In conclusion, while the attempt to articulate a theory of democracy based on the works of Durkheim, Dewey, and Habermas – a triad from which Durkheim could be left out without significant loss – has to be seen as a decisive step forward in the self-understanding of critical theory, one wonders whether Honneth should not have gone even farther in his pragmatizing strategy.

67 Honneth (2014), 305.
68 A promising attempt in this direction is presently pursued by Just Serrano Zamora, a former student of Honneth that further advances the pragmatization of critical theory. See Serrano Zamora (2017).
Indeed, rather than continuing to assume the dichotomy between the state and the public sphere as the cornerstone of a critical theory of democracy, it is probably through its overcoming that the irreversible process of the pragmatization of the Frankfurt School, originally begun by Habermas, can be brought to its complete execution.\footnote{70 I further explore and justify this claim in Frega (2018), Ch. 8.}

Rahel Jaeggi’s reluctant pragmatism

Jaeggi’s recent work provides additional evidence to the claim here defended that the Frankfurt School is undergoing a process of pragmatization that is deeply transforming its basic theoretical premises as well as its own self-understanding. In her later work, Jaeggi relies explicitly on Dewey’s theory of inquiry as intelligent problem solving to develop her own theory of immanent criticism. In the context of a broader reflection on the possibility of criticizing forms of life, Jaeggi finds in Dewey’s epistemology a promising starting point she strives to recombine with G. W. Hegel’s and Alasdair MacIntyre’s conceptions of crisis.

Like her predecessors, Jaeggi’s turn to pragmatism stems from an epistemological reflection aimed at understanding the social basis of rationality in non-reductionist ways. While she does not address explicit criticisms at Horkheimer and Adorno, the acceptance of Habermas’ diagnosis of their “normative defeatisms” provides the background of her entire project. Like Honneth, Jaeggi sees in pragmatism a re-actualization of Hegel’s thought, and in Dewey’s theory of problem-resolution a variant of Hegel’s theory of social learning through crisis. From this standpoint, Jaeggi conceives of society’s capacity for problem-solving and crisis-resolution as a valid normative criteria to criticize forms of life: a form of life fails when it cannot solve the problems that emerge within itself, or when it succumbs to a crisis that shuts it from its foundations. Her major claim is that what provides forms of life with a rational content and hence grounds the possibility of critique, is precisely their capacity to
learn in order to adjust to historical variations.

This problem solving orientation, in classical pragmatist style, is seen as incorporating a functional-instrumental as well as a normative dimension. On the one hand, problem-solving refers unambiguously to means-ends rationality. On the other hands, problems concern also values and norms.\footnote{See for example Dewey (1915). For a commentary, see Frega (2010).} Indeed, for critical theorists as well as for pragmatists, problems represent needs that have been culturally and socially mediated, a thesis epitomized in Hilary Putnam’s rejection of the fact/value dichotomy as well as in Habermas’ entanglement of facticity and validity. On this basis, Jaeggi can then conclude that “the project of a critique of lifeforms is rooted in a so to say pragmatist reconstruction (and reduction) of historical philosophical motives.”\footnote{Jaeggi (2014), 59.} This project is based on a social naturalism that conceives of associated living as a series of more or less successful adaptive moves, and of rationality as the norm of evolutionary success, reformulated in terms of social learning.\footnote{Jaeggi (2014), 343.} In other words, as the result of successful processes of social inquiry aimed at solving collective problems of social coordination.\footnote{Surprisingly, Jaeggi contends that Dewey did not possess a theory of social change, nor a conception of collective learning as social process. Statements to the contrary can be found throughout Dewey’s work. See for example Dewey (2015), (1920); Dewey and Tufts (1932).}

Like Dewey and Mead on the one hand, and Habermas and Honneth on the other, Jaeggi tries to reconcile the social functionalism evoked by the pragmatic language of problem resolution with an ethical normativism that rejects purely instrumental accounts of what is a problem. Conceived as bundles of social practices, forms of life are seen as instances of solutions to social problems, in a way that owes much to Dewey’s social naturalism. Indeed, it is because they are socially construed that social problems cannot be handled in merely technical/positivistic ways. As Jaeggi contends, a form of life includes solutions to problems that are never given independently from how they are grasped within a form of life. Forms of life proceed therefore by
developing new interpretations of social phenomena and by subsequently providing solutions consistent with these interpretations, so that the dialectical interplay between practices and problems can be seen as the motor of social change.\textsuperscript{75} One can then say that the concept of forms of life stands to practice-theory as the concept of experience stands to pragmatism.

In the footsteps of Dewey, Jaeggi describes the unfolding of forms of life through the dialectical steps of inquiry as proceeding from the unarticulated experience of an indeterminate situation up the ladder until the identification and implementation of a satisfying solution. And indeed, the process of passing through all of the “different stages of indetermination,”\textsuperscript{76} whereby a situation is first experienced in its indeterminateness, then a determination is further adopted, then a diagnosis is formulated, and finally a problem is identified, makes sense only under the assumption that social practices are impregnated by reason. In discontinuity with her predecessors though, to explain the rational basis of social life Jaeggi does not resort to the Habermasian dualism of instrumental and communicative rationality. Indeed, the epistemology of inquiry has taken over all the epistemic work this dualism accomplished in the works of her predecessors. Insofar as problems encompass a functional as well as a normative dimension, their resolution presupposes an epistemic orientation that neither the concept of instrumental rationality nor that of communicative rationality can fully grasp. On the one hand, Jaeggi defines rationality as an immanent norm of human life which proves utterly incompatible with any instrumentalistic reduction. Normativity and rationality are made the flesh and blood of human associated life as it unfolds in the interstices of social practices whose nature and quality are inseparable from their problem solving orientation. On the other hand, rationality is concretely embedded in the practical undertakings within social life in ways that a communicative theory of reason fails to grasp.

By defining criticism through problem solving, Jaeggi does

\textsuperscript{75} Jaeggi (2014), 342.

\textsuperscript{76} Jaeggi (2014), 213.
not need to resort to the dualism of instrumental and communicative rationality. Her epistemology thus goes significantly beyond Habermas and Honneth in developing a notion of rationality that is decidedly more consistent with the pragmatist non-dualist conception of inquiry. Seen from a pragmatist standpoint, this move helps overcome one of the biggest theoretical obstacles separating the two traditions. Rationality is seen as permeating human forms of life deep into their action-oriented and problem-based structure; it is an irreducible and distinctive feature of human life, a mode of being which qualifies our everyday patterns of social interactions, our dealing with the external world, our being normative creatures. From the perspective of a practice-based theory of forms of life, the social basis of human rationality is no more rooted in our linguistic nature, but, rather, in our being social actors involved in ongoing practical undertakings aimed at the task of solving a form of life’s problems. Jaeggi is then in profound agreement with one of the most fundamental theoretical claims of classical pragmatists, that is to say the idea that the real basis of human reason lies within interactions with others in the practically oriented context of a form of life. So much for the similarities.

Jaeggi’s account of the immanent rationality of forms of life parts company with Dewey’s account of the rationality of experience-based forms of inquiry where she retreats to a Hegelian interpretation of problems as ‘crisis’, as this assumptions introduces dialectical rigidities in an otherwise more flexible account of social change. Through MacIntyre’s epistemology, Jaeggi imports in her framework the Kuhnian dualism of normal and revolutionary science which, reinforced through Hegel’s dialectics, conduces her to lose sight of the change-inducing power of ordinary events and practices, a consequence that is hard to square with the practice-based approach she has adopted since the start. Dewey is then criticized for not having grasped the inner logic of social change as a self-induced process of crisis resolution. Yet where this leads is not clear.

From the standpoint of the pragmatist ecological view of society and nature, this move ends up impoverishing rather than
enriching our understanding of how social change happens. On the one hand, this juxtaposition of problems and crises leads one to construe ‘normal’ (Kuhn-MacIntyre) or ‘first-order’ (Jaeggi) problems as unreflective, insofar as they always presuppose an interpretative framework that they cannot call into question. This distinction reminds us of Habermas’ equally troubling distinction between conventional and reflective morality. Dewey’s notion of problem solving is then reduced to normal or first-order problems, a move clearly mistaken. On the other hand, crises are transformed into epoch-making, radical, rare, and totalizing events through which an entire normative framework – a form of life – is overturned and replaced by another. As she explains, “contradiction and crisis denotes [...] the decline (Verfall) of a historical or spiritual formation.”

If what entitles us to criticize forms of life is their capacity or incapacity to overcome totalizing self-induced crisis, this solution seems inescapable, and yet puzzling. Kuhn’s and MacIntyre’s models of social change put an extreme emphasis on historical discontinuity and tend to substantialize historical epochs under the form of closed social totalities. Extending the same pattern to smaller social practices is problematic though. Taking side with Hegel avoids these problems, but at the cost that the distinction between problems and crisis loses its explanatory power, so that we are back to Dewey’s epistemology of inquiry. Indeed, from a pragmatist standpoint this dualizing way of thinking is neither warranted nor necessary, and the same theoretical results could easily have been achieved within the simpler and more elegant pragmatist conception of rationality as inquiry, simply by distinguishing different types of problems. One could then simply drop the distinction between problems and crisis, without losing an ounce in explanatory power, and gaining in theoretical clarity and strength.

A second, and related difficulty this strategy raises, concerns the distinction between internally-induced and externally-induced change. Jaeggi contends that, contrary to problems, crises are characterized by their immanent dynamics. Yet if one admits that

77 Jaeggi (2015), 375.
social practices are essentially entangled, interpenetrating, mutually influencing, and open to the outer world, this distinction is puzzling, as it ends up substantializing the notion of social practice in unnecessary ways. Indeed, insofar as contradictions can only be internal, the very possibility of criticism must rely upon the dual separation of internal and external. Here a sophisticated notion of conflict such as Dewey’s would have been more helpful to describe how problems arising within a social unit may induce social change.\(^{79}\) Moreover, this distinction ends up limiting its own explanatory potential to crises that are “self-induced and within it [the form of life] unsolvable.”\(^{80}\) Why self-induced crisis should have priority over externally-induced crisis is decidedly unclear, particularly if one admits the strong interdependence that characterizes our globalized and interconnected world. If on the other hand externally induced crises are recuperated under the concept of internal appropriation,\(^{81}\) we are once again back at Dewey’s ecological understanding of social progress as problem solving, with the additional difficulty that the ecological dimension through which Dewey grasped the organism-situation interaction is lost.

This return to Hegel mediated by the Kuhn-MacIntyre hypothesis is therefore not really convincing, as it forces all possible forms of social change into the Procrustean bed of a continuist philosophy of history based on the notion of internal contradictions. Rather than seeing Hegel’s conception of crisis as an improvement on Dewey’s conception of problem-solving, the contrary seems to be true.\(^{82}\) Indeed, Dewey’s social philosophy, with its acute sensitivity

\(^{79}\) I discuss Dewey’s theory of conflict in this perspective and provide a threefold typology of conflicts and normative criteria in Frega (2015b).

\(^{80}\) Hegel describes crisis as “problems that systematically lie within a given social formation, that originate within it and that cannot find a solution within it. […] Hegel’s diagnosis of crisis describes the decline (Verderben) of given forms of life (sittlicher Formationen) as self-induced (hausgemacht)”. Jaeggi (2014), 373.

\(^{81}\) Jaeggi (2014), 386.

\(^{82}\) Here we touch upon a much more complex problem, which is that of understanding to what extent social philosophy needs to rely structurally upon concepts such as these of false consciousness or reification. Here a major difference
for interdependencies – which he termed the extended networks of indirect consequences – appears to be a much reliable guide than Hegel's moncausal and intrinsic dialectic, to explain how social change and social learning happens, often piecemeal. Opposing self-induced and other-induced crisis is to this extent not very helpful: crisis emerges always at the crossroad of internal difficulties and new external challenges, and nothing is really gained by prioritizing the one over the other. An additional element of concern is that the scope of critique is unnecessarily reduced to a retrospective process of interpretation, something Jaeggi admits when she proposes to understand Hegel's contribution to her project in terms of a “retrospective teleology.”

Whilst historical evolution remains an important framework for assessing normative practices for pragmatists as well, their future-oriented attitude of reconstruction stands here in tension with a conception of critique that can be exercised only (or at any event preferably) retrospectively. On these and related aspects, Honneth's reading of a Hegelianized Dewey appears more productive than Jaeggi's insistence on differences. Indeed, Jaeggi's attempted reconciliation of these positions in a "dialectical-pragmatist" understanding of learning processes shows that if these problematic and unnecessary theoretical distinctions are set aside, we – unsurprisingly – discover that in the end Hegel's and Dewey's theoretical positions are not that far apart, and that much in Dewey's epistemology and political philosophy can be seen as an updated and non-metaphysical variant of Hegel's philosophy.

Jaeggi is therefore right in concluding that Hegelian dialectic and pragmatism share a common project aiming at “thinking social change as a process of rational transformation that takes place between a certain strand in critical theory and pragmatism seems to arise, as I discuss in Frega (2013a).”

84 I justify this claim in greater details in Frega (2012b), Chapter 8.
85 This is notably the case for Hegel's idea of articulation as the process whereby something implicit becomes explicit, which Jaeggi utilizes to describe social change as a learning process. This idea plays an equally if not more important role in Dewey's social philosophy, and more broadly in pragmatism. See Jung (2009); Frega (2012b).
through continuity and discontinuity [through which] socio-historical processes can be understood as processes of learning."\(^{86}\)

For all these reasons, Jaeggi’s account is at the same time refreshing and troubling. Refreshing, as it finally attains a conception of reason that is freed from the shortcomings of the first generation critical theorists, while at the same time not plagued by the problematic dualisms to which Habermas resorted to bring critical theory out of its dead end, and to which Honneth remains at least partially committed.\(^{87}\) Problematic, as it reminds us that any theoretical strategy that in the footsteps of Habermas wants to overcome the epistemological riddles of the founding fathers of the Frankfurt school cannot stop half-way, contenting itself with a dialectical reconciliation between instrumental and communicative rationality. Jaeggi’s back and forth between Hegel and Dewey remains in the end unresolved, and her endorsement of pragmatism, to a certain extent, reluctant. Yet in Jaeggi’s work we appreciate the distance traveled by the Frankfurt School in its nearly century-long journey: from the first generation’s initial project of a science-based emancipatory critical theory, to the later unfortunate reduction of rationality to instrumental reason, to Habermas’ rediscovery of a Peircean conception of intersubjective rationality, to Honneth’s reconciliation of instrumental and communicative rationality under a still more explicit endorsement of pragmatist themes, to the final, although incomplete, adoption of a conception of rationality as inquiry in Jaeggi’s own version of a critical theory of society understood as a critique of forms of life.

**Conclusions**

Examination of the works of Habermas, Honneth, and Jaeggi shows that interest for pragmatism within critical theory is motivated by epistemological as well as by political concerns. On the epistemological side, since the very inception of the Frankfurt School

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\(^{86}\) Jaeggi (2014), 444.

\(^{87}\) See Frega (2013b).
in the works of Horkheimer, critical theorists have been attracted in particular by pragmatism’s similar concern with the place of reason in society. Whereas Horkheimer and Adorno failed to understand the specificity of pragmatist epistemology, wrongly identifying pragmatism with a variant of positivism, since the early works of Habermas and Apel, and later of Joas and Honneth, a new and more sophisticated awareness has emerged, one that correctly sees pragmatism as a post-foundational, post-metaphysical, post-positivistic, fallibilist and experimental epistemology based on the idea of rationality as inquiry that has much in common with the Frankfurt School’s critical program. On the political side, an initial prejudiced identification of pragmatism with the political philosophy of rampant American capitalism has steadily given way to the more sympathetic views of Habermas and then Honneth, which have both clearly seen its superiority in offering a valid normative framework for thinking political legitimacy, and therefore for identifying appropriate conditions for social emancipation. Habermas, Honneth, and then Jaeggi have seen in pragmatism a promising program for developing a critical theory of society capable of combining epistemic with emancipatory interests, one that is however more consistent with the socio-political conditions that have developed since the second half of the 20th century.

The emancipatory role played by social movements, the democratizing function of civic society, and the post-colonial movements of independence have shown that social emancipation can be promoted by rationality-laden processes of collective learning which have contributed to a large extent to overcome formal domination and, to a certain extent, also to reduce forms of informal domination. Habermas’ theory of deliberative democracy, Honneth’s conception of a democratic ethos and Jaeggi’s theory of forms of life demonstrate in different ways the extent to which pragmatism has become an indispensable ingredient of contemporary critical theory. In this paper I have also shown to what extent this process remains incomplete, particularly where these authors resist giving up dichotomizing ways of thinking which prove

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88 Wagner (2016).
incompatible with the pragmatist method they wish to appropriate. This situation creates theoretical tensions that are still unresolved. To that extent, a more thorough reliance on a pragmatist epistemology would help critical theory pursue its own goals while avoiding some theoretical problems that still plague it.

In the face of the ever-resurgent temptation of totalizing models of critique, achieving this process of pragmatization offers a promising learning path. In epistemology, this requires that all the remnants of Habermas’ dualisms be more consistently removed, and that the idea of rationality as inquiry be more consistently articulated in the terms of a critical theory of society. In political theory, this requires that the Habermasian theory of the public sphere be completed with a theory of democratic experimentalism, better suited to account for the emancipatory function of private and public institutions such as the firm and the bureaucracy.
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