3. Kritische Theorie/Critical Theory

Prof. Dr. Andreas Georg Scherer

University of Zurich
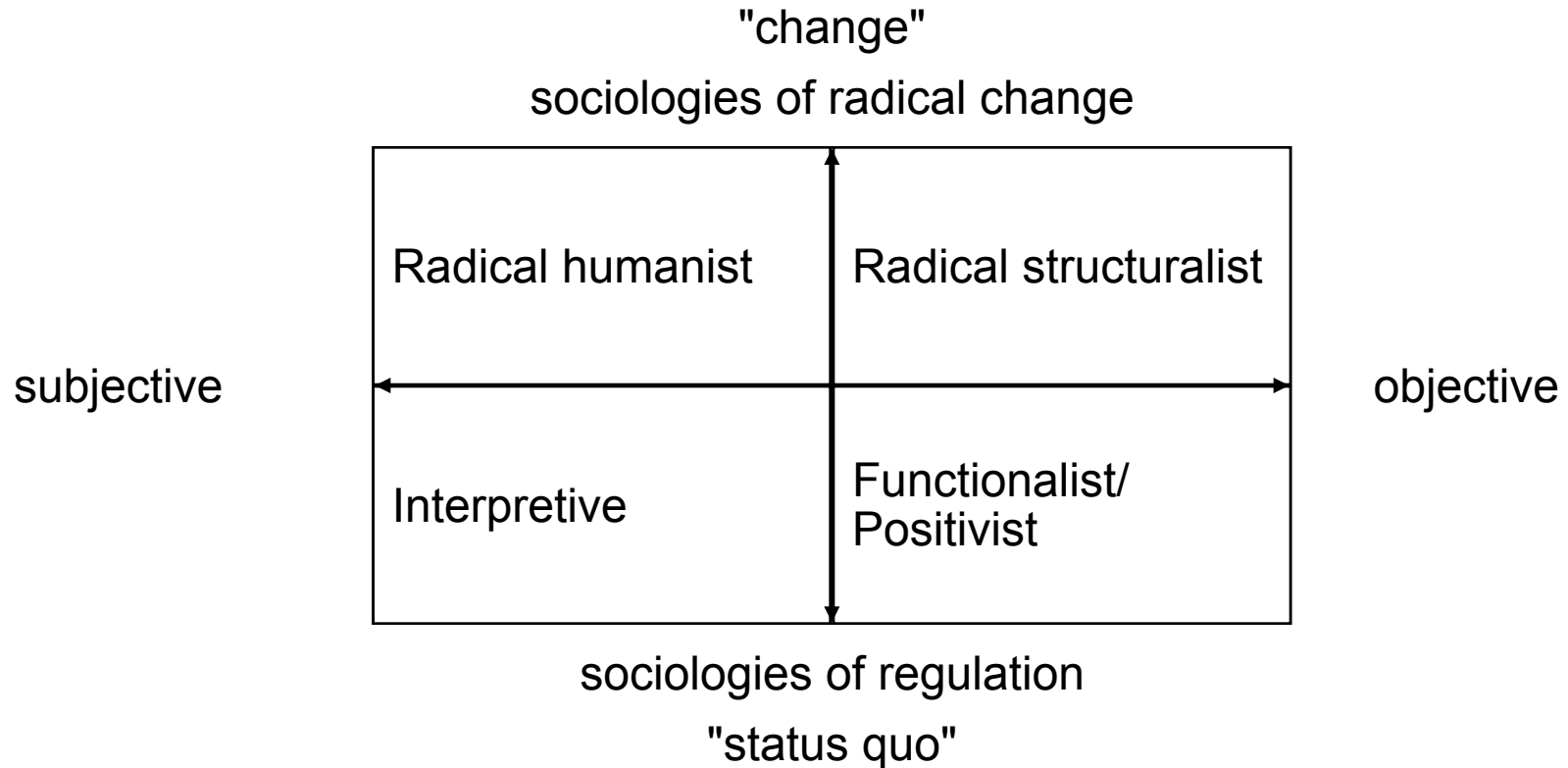
Vorlesung „Wissenschaftstheorie"

Literature:

Scherer, A.G. 2009: Critical Theory and its Contribution to the Emergence of Critical Management Studies. In: Alvesson, M. / Willmott, H. / Bridgman, T. (Hrsg.): *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 29-51.

Steffy, B.D. / Grimes, A.J. 1986: A Critical Theory of Organization Science. In: *Academy of Management Review 11*: 322-336.

Willmott, H. 2003: Organization Theory as a Critical Science? Forms of Analysis and `New Organizational Forms`. In: Tsoukas, H. / Knudsen, C. (Hrsg.): *The Oxford Handbook of Organization Theory. Meta-Theoretical Perspectives.* Oxford: Oxford University Press: 88-112.

Sociological paradigms

"change"

sociologies of radical change

Radical humanist	Radical structuralist
Interpretive	Functionalist/ Positivist

subjective ←→ objective

sociologies of regulation

"status quo"

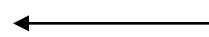Source: Burrell & Morgan 1979: 22, modified, see also Gioia & Pitre AMR 1990: 585.

Sociological paradigms
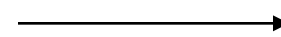
Subjectiv-Objective Dimension of Burrell & Morgan (1979)
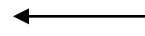
Subjective Paradigm   **Objective Paradigm**

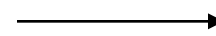|		
Nominalism	⟵ *Ontology* ⟶	**Realism**
Anti-Positivism	⟵ *Epistemology* ⟶	**Positivism**
Voluntarism	⟵ *Concept of human being* ⟶	**Determinism**
Ideographic	⟵ *Methodology* ⟶	**Nomothetic**
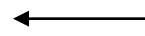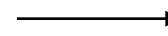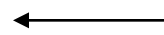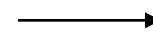
Sociological paradigms

Change-Status-quo-Dimension of Burrell & Morgan (1979)

Paradigma of sociologies of change

→ **emancipatory interest**

How can the current status-quo be criticized and changed? E.g. how can individuals be freed from structural dependency and domination?
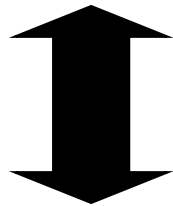
Paradigma of sociologies of order

→ **technical interest**
→ **practical interest**

Why do social entities persist? What conditions explain the status-quo?

Sociological paradigms

Dominance of current sociological theories

Critical theory
Postmodern philosophy

Radical humanist

Radical structuralist

Interpretive

Functionalist/ Positivist

Natural science approach
Rational choice approach

Interpretive approach
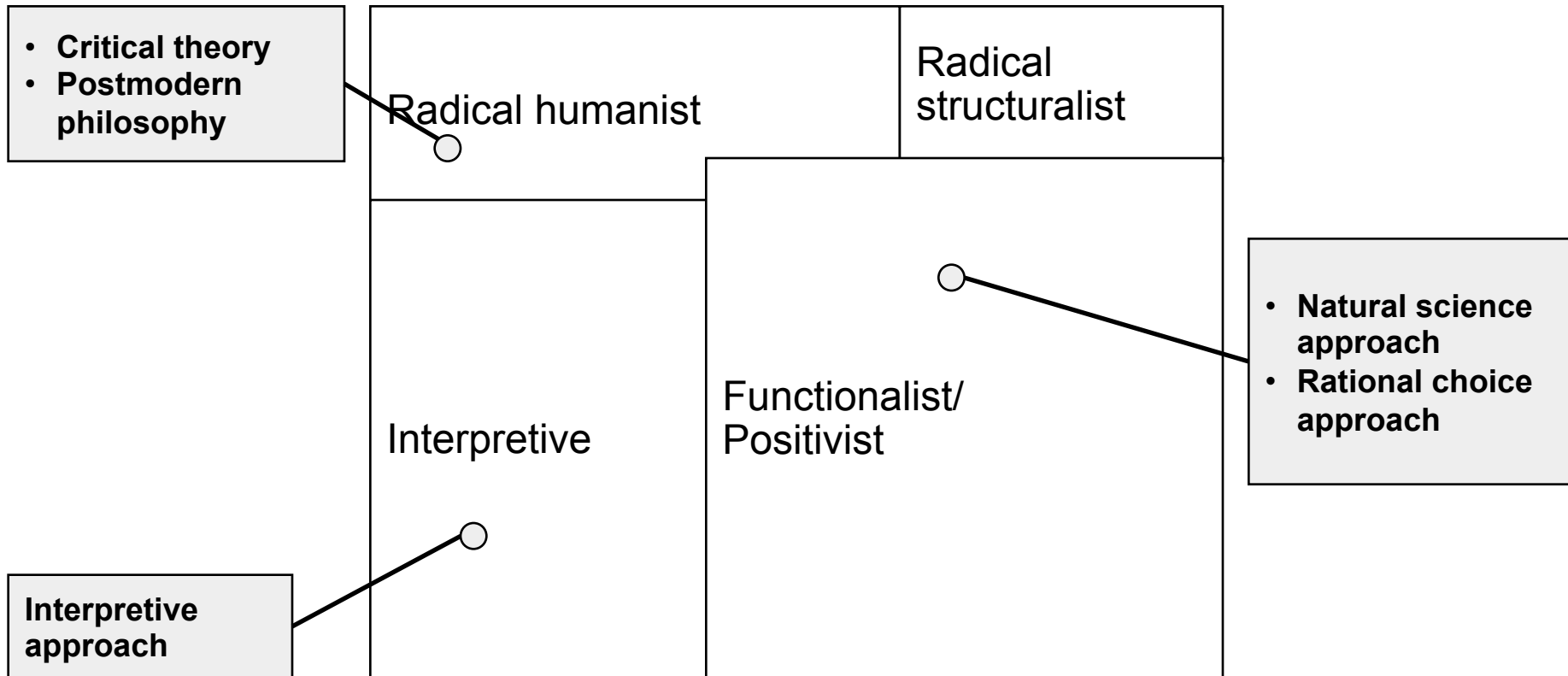
Source: see Gioia & Pitre 1990: 586.

Radical Humanism

1. Ontologische Grundannahme

Die bestehenden Strukturen sind das Ergebnis sozialer Konstruktion. Soziale Konstruktionen werden allerdings von den Interpretationen der mächtigsten Akteuren beeinflusst.

2. Epistemologische Grundannahme

Wahrheit und Logik erlangen immer nur im Rahmen eigener, bestimmter Interpretations- und Sprachsysteme an Geltung.

„knowledge gained in organization science is severely one-sided and incomplete because the historical and ideological facts have been neglected" (Steffy/Grimes 1986: 328)

3. Methodologische Grundannahmen

Die Methode orientiert sich am interpretativen Paradigma. Allerdings gehen Forscher nicht bloss der Frage nach, wie soziale Realität konstruiert wird. Vielmehr geht es ihnen primär darum zu ergründen, warum soziale Wirklichkeit auf diese Weise konstruiert wird und welche Rolle die Interessen der beteiligten Akteure spielen.

4. Gesellschaftstheorie

Der radikale Humanismus möchte die Mitglieder sozialer Einheiten von Bevormundung, Entfremdung, Ausbeutung und Unterdrückung befreien. Anleitung zu Bildung und Kritik sowie zu sozialen Reformen.

(Burrell/Morgan 1979, Gioia/Pitre 1990, Scherer 2006)

Characteristics of Radical Humanism Paradigm

- Research goals
  - » „to describe and critique in order to change (achieve freedom through revision of consciousness)
- Central concepts
  - » „social construction of reality, distortion, interests served"
- Advances in theory building
  - » „disclosure through critical analysis"

  Gioia/Pitre 1990, p. 591

Characteristics of Radical Humanism Paradigm

- Opening Work
  - » Selecting a Topic: What are the issues? What are the research questions?
  - » Designing research: What are data? Where to find data? How to record data?
- Data collection
  - » Identifying specific cases or existing research
  - » Questioning informants according to what is relevant to them; contextual information pertaining to deep structure
- Analysis
  - » Coding: Provide a description at the 1st level of abstraction
  - » Formulating a description
  - » Deep analysis: Reflect on what makes people construct the world the way they do
  - » Criticizing: Unveil how deep forces influence the first level of abstraction; identify whose interests are served
- Theory building
  - » Writing up dialectical analysis: Show how level of consciousnes should change

Gioia/Pitre 1990, p. 593

What is critical theory (CT)?

- a socio-philosophical school of thought
- part of the tradition of the enlightenment
- main concerns of CT:
    - » analyze social conditions
    - » criticize unjustified use of power
    - » change established social traditions and institutions
    - » free human beings from dependency, subordination, and suppression
    - » develop a more human, rational, and just society

Positivism vs anti-positivism

- natural sciences
- explain natural phenomena
- search for regularitites
- value-free
- objectivity
- technical reason

- humanities
- understand social pheomena
- explore ideosynchrasies
- value-ladden
- social construction
- normative-ethical reason

Historical roots

- critical theory of Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno
- Frankfurter Institut für Sozialforschung ("Frankfurter Schule")
  - 1923 foundation with financial support of German business men Hermann and Felix Weil
  - Grünberg (director 1924-28), Horkheimer (director from 1931), Löwenthal, Pollock, Fromm, Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse
  - 1933 closed due to Nazis' advent to power, emigration of researchers to UK and US
  - 1934 Institute for Social Research (ISR) in New York City
  - 1950 reopening in Frankfurt a.M. by Horkheimer

Horkheimer
Critical Theory (1937)

- individuals can become aware of their oppression and subordination

- CT can
  - » contribute to the process of individual maturation
  - » revitalize the ideas of Enlightenment

- rejects
  - » positivist claim that social science can produce objective, value-free knowledge
  - » Marxian structuralist claim that social change will be brought about by the revolution of the proletariat

Horkheimer & Adorno
Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947)

- modern society and its positivist model focus on one-sided concept of instrumental reason

- humans use scientific knowledge to dominate nature and social institutions

- science as an instrument for those in office and power

- new forms of domination that are more powerful than those grounded in common sense, tradition, and religion

- extreme pessimism concerning the possibility of social change through education and enlightenment

Robert Marcuse
One-dimensional Man (1964)

- historical and cultural conditions of capitalist society shape social patterns and roles

- mass-production, mass-media and commercials seduce people and have pacifying effects

- however, people at the margins, students, intellectuals, and artists, can reject materialist lifestyles and remain at a critical distance to the establishment

- influence on the students' revolt of the 1960s

Marcuse
The End of Utopia (1970)

- „we have the capacity to turn the world into hell, and we are well on the way to doing so" (p. 62)

- „All the material and intellectual forces which could be put to work for the realization of a free society are at hand. That they are not used for the purpose is to be attributed to the total mobilization of existing society against its own potential for liberation. But this situation in no way makes the idea of radical transformation itself a utopia." (p. 64)

Jürgen Habermas

- born 1929
- 1954: PhD University of Bonn
- from 1956: post-doc student at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research
- 1961: habilitation at University of Marburg
- 1961-64: Professor at University of Heidelberg
- 1964-71, 1983-94 Professor at University of Frankfurt
- 1971-1981: Director MPI Starnberg

Jürgen Habermas

- critique of the pessimism and the lack of normative foundations of Horkheimer & Adorno's theory

- search for new foundations of social critique

- communication as the central medium of social relations; it is also the anchor point for social analysis and critique

- pragmatism (James), liguistic philosophy (Peirce), speech-analytic philosophy (Austin, Searl)

Jürgen Habermas
Knowledge and Human Interests (1971)

- constitutive cognitive interests
- technical interest in the prediction and control of objectified processes
- practical interest in the understanding of actions and symbols
- emancipatory interest in critical reflection and change of the status quo of social systems
  - » subordination is reduced, self-actualization is fostered

Jürgen Habermas
What is Universal Pragmatics? (1976)

- search for a universal structure of communication as a basis of social analysis and critique

- speech act theory (Austin, Searl)

- in any utterance a speaker raises four validity claims that can be challenged by a listener

  » comprehensibleness (speaker can be understood yes/no)

  » truth (speaker tells the truth yes/no)

  » rightness (speaker makes justified normative claims yes/no)

  » sincerety (speaker does what (s)he says)

- any of these validity claims can be assessed in a discourse

Jürgen Habermas
Discourse theory (passim)

- speakers (and listeners) presuppose that any of their claims can be assessed and verified (or falsified) under ideal conditions („counter-factual assumption")

- ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1993: 56)
    » freedom to enter the discourse
    » participation with equal rights
    » truthfulness of the participants
    » absense of coercison

- „forceless force of the better argument" (Habermas 1990: 23) shall motivate participants to reach a consensus

- critical tool for the analysis of real communication

Jürgen Habermas
Theory of Communicative Action (1984 & 87)

- **Lifeworld vs System (Parsons, Weber, Schütz)**
- **Lifeworld**
  - » as the social world that is based on taken-for-granted social-skills and knowledge of its members
  - » is constructed and maintained through face-to-face interactions and immediate conversations between ordinary people
  - » builds on communicative reason in order to establish a shared understanding of the world as a meaningful place

Jürgen Habermas
Theory of Communicative Action (1984 & 87)

- **System**
  - » is the result of differentiation and specialization of modern society
  - » modern society is characterized by mass phenomena, anonymity, individualization, and the erosion of tradition
  - » system differentiation is a response to the growing complexity of modern societies
  - » subsystems (economy, politics, science, law etc.) work according to their subsystem specific logic (costs, power, truth, justice etc.)
  - » social systems and subsystems emphasize the efficient realization of given ends

Jürgen Habermas
Theory of Communicative Action (1983 & 87)

- social systems are governed by instrumental rationality, i.e. the efficient choice of means for given ends

- systemic coordination is based on the incentives and restrictions of the subsystems

- logic of the system, driven by its efficiency, supplants that of the lifeworld

- communicative reason is displaced by instrumental rationality ("colonization of the lifeworld")

- critical analysis of the process of modernization and the pathologies of a one-sided rationalized lifeworld

Jürgen Habermas
Discourse Ethics (1990 & 1993)

- moral decisions and actions can be validated by means of argument

- discourse ethics emphasizes the process of ethical decision making, not so much the results (consequences)

- principle of universalization (U)

  » moral decisions are only valid if <u>all those who are affected</u> can consent to them or agree to their consequences

- principle of discourse (D)

  » agreement of all must be achieved <u>through open and free discourse</u>. Agreement rests on the power of the better argument

Central Themes of Critical Theory
(Alvesson & Willmott 1996)

- critique of the dialectics of enlightenment
  - » science develops knowledge that serves the interests of the powerful
  - » people are not helped to emanicipate from prevailing conditons of dependency and supression
  - » social conditions become naturalized
- one-dimensionality and consumerism
  - » individuals are socialized to become unreflective consumers and obedient workers
  - » education and social control lead to the stabilization of roles (consumers, housewives, familiy fathers etc.)

Central Themes of Critical Theory
(Alvesson & Willmott 1996)

- critique of technocracy
  - » focus on instrumental reason & choice of means
  - » denial of the relevancy of ethics
  - » ends are beyond scientific analysis

- emphasis on communicative action
  - » linguistic turn in philosophy
  - » social rules and institutions emerge and change by means of communication
  - » critical analysis as the analysis of language use and the communicative conditions of society

Critical Theory Method

- builds upon the interpretive understanding of social phenomena

- goes beyond the interpretive perspective's conservative attitude

- practical interest & emancipatory interest

- normative point of view cannot be derived monologically, but only in uncoerced dialogue with those concerned

- principle of universalization & principle of discourse

- researcher as a critical interpreter

Impact of CT on Organization Studies

- dominance of the natural science model in the social sciences

- assumptions of the positivist approach
  - » metaphysical assumption about the structure of the (natural and social) world (ontology)
  - » knowledge creation by systematic observation (epistemology)
  - » searching for objective laws of cause and effect relationships (methodology)
  - » individuals are ignorant of the driving force of their behavior (determinism)
  - » knowledge contributes to wellbeing of society (socio-philosophical assumption)

Impact of CT on Organization Studies

- **methodical critique of the positivist approach**
  - » social world is not objectively given but created and developed by human actions that are historically and culturally situated
  - » social entities and knowledge about these are not separated, but constituted in processes of communication and interpretation
  - » researcher interprets the interpretations of actors from a participator's perspective
    - first order vs second order reality
    - historical and cultural relativity of interpretations
    - critical self-reflection

Impact of CT on Organization Studies

- normative-ethical critique of the positivist approach
  - » positivism focuses on the explanation (an implicitly) on the stabilization of the social status-quo
  - » provides the sociotechnical means to preserve existing institutions and relations of power
  - » positivist research advances the interests of the most powerful actors in society
  - » positivism focuses on efficiency rather than social acceptability (legitimacy)

Impact of CT on Organization Studies

● **CT's critique of the interpretive approach**

» method: limitations of phenomenology and hermeneutics

» normativ-ethical: interpretivism reproduces the others' interpretation without questioning or critical analysis

» interpretivism has conservative, status-quo preserving effects

Relevancy of CT for Organization Studies

- CT inspires new research program of CMS
- critique of established OS research
  - » what is bad in current OS research?
- development of original contributions to OS
  - » what can be contributed instead?

Relevancy of CT for Organization Studies

● **concerning the goals of OS research**
  » „survival" of social systems
    – who defines survival/wellbeing of society?
    – role of power in social relations
  » productivity of organizations vs wellbeing of society

● **concerning the methods of OS research**
  » „discover which (if any) theoretical statements express unchangeable laws of social action and which, though they express relations of dependence because they are ideologically fixed, are in principle subject to change" (Habermas 1966: 294)

Areas of contribution: strategic management

- **received view: positivist strategic management**
  - » focus on financial objectives and interests of powerful shareholders
  - » organization as instrumental for executing the strategies of the top management
  - » organizational members motivated by sanctions and control
- **alternative view: critical strategic management**
  - » planning as a process of social contradiction with various interests and actors involved
  - » strategic decision making based on (ideal) discourses
  - » organizational conditions that facilitate discourses

Areas of contribution: organization theory

- received view: bureaucratic/post-bureaucratic theories
  - » organizational structures and processes as a means to contribute to the survival of organizations (efficiency and/or legitimacy)
  - » implicitly the disciplining and dominating functions of organizational structures are taken for granted

- alternative view: critical OT
  - » change structures so that individuals are released from suppression and marginalization
  - » create work places that are more human
  - » establish new forms of participation to enable the self actualization of people
  - » key is the role of communication

Areas of contribution: Business & society, CSR, business ethics

- received view: instrumental/positivist CSR
  - » CSR as a means to contribute to the profits of the organization
- alternative views: corporate citizenship & political CSR
  - » role of business in capitalist (world) society
    - – how can the negative effects (externalities) of global business be avoided or compensated?
  - » organizational structures and procedures
    - – how can structures and procedures provide a context for (ideal) discourses?
  - » ethical decision making & responsible leadership
    - – how can morality on the individual level be enhanced?

Areas of contribution: HRM

- **received view: positivist HRM**
  - » personal functions (selection, appraisal, compensation, development) as a means to control individual's contribution to organizational efficiency
- **alternative view: critical HRM**
  - » change personal functions so that they serve (also) the emancipation and self-actualization of humans
  - » e.g. critical human resource develoment may help individuals to identify situations of oppression and to engage in processes of organizational reform

Areas of contribution: accounting

- **alternative view: critical marketing**
  - » critique of
    - – manipulation of consumers by way of advertising, brand management, identity creation
    - – displacement of the value of people by the value of objects
  - » inform consumers to make informed choices

- **alternative view: critical accounting**
  - » assets, costs, profits objectively measured vs social conventions
  - » accounting as a passive reflector of economy vs a producer of social realities („what you measure is what you get")

Critiques of critical theory:
Modern systems theory (Luhmann)

- CT does not take the functional imperatives of segregated subsystems into account

- communicative rationality cannot influence or even counteract the instrumental rationality of the economic (costs) or political (power) subsystem

- economic/political sub-system operates along its system specific logic (costs/power)

- subsystems can take other logics (e.g. morality) into account only when translated into costs/power

- this makes communicative rationality superflous

Critiques of critical theory: Social and political theory

- too utopian for real political institutions (Elster)
- ideal speech situation overly idealistic
- real communication is characterized by uneven distribution of power and the oppression of voices
- (Habermas 2001 (345): more pragmatic conception of democracy that takes "into account the multiplicity of forms of communication in which a common will is produced"
- Nonnan (2005) criticizes Habermas' concession to the dominance of economic rationality

Critiques of critical theory
Poststructuralism/postmodernism

- any communication is influenced by power
- even well intentioned philosophers cannot escape this condition
- universal rules of argumentation as a subtle form of advancing a particular doctrine with the result of marginalizing the others' voice and homogenizing minorities and cultures
- philosophical rules and methods cannot be universalized; rejection of fundamentalism
- culture- and history-bound nature of any knowledge creation

Critiques of critical theory: Pragmatist philosophy

- truth is based on social conventions that depend on a particular culture and history and cannot be universalized (Rorty 1985)

- Habermas acknowledges history- and culture-bound nature of knowledge creation

- he claims that argumentation „remains the only available medium of ascertaining truth since truth claims that have been problematized cannot be tested in any other way"

- this applies also to normative-ethical questions

More recent developments of CT

- **Habermas on philosophy of law and domocracy: "Between facts and norms"**

  » democratic organization of government under conditions of complexity and pluralism of values

  – political theory based solely on ideal conditions of communication is "too idealistic" (Habermas 1998: 244)therefore: pragmatic version of deliberative democracy

  – no revolutionary alternative to market societies

  – acknowledgement of complexity reducing function of markets

  – political order to domesticate economic exchange by democratic procedures and institutions

  – governance beyond and above (NGOs, civil society, media)

More recent developments of CT

» law as a set of rules according to which human beings relate to each other in a particular state

– reflects citizen's current values and concerns
– represent the best that can be achieved at a given point in time and in a given society
– legal rules satisfy the conditions of D, but not necessarily U

» relationship between democracy and law

» challenges of globalization

– new forms of legitimate governance and the role of democratic politics in world society ("The inclusion of the other 1998; The post-national constellation 1998, The divided west 2006)

» implications of organization/management theory?

More recent developments of CT

- **Third generation of the Frankfurt School**
  - » Axel Honneth, Rainer Forst et al.
  - » more concerned with subjectivity and the local and concrete
  - » still refer to normative standards
  - » challenge injustice of current status-quo
- Honneth: The struggle for recognition 1996
  - » older Frankfurt school neglects the role of conflicting interaction among competing social groups as the driving force of social change
  - » struggle for recognition among competing social groups
  - » contextualizing of normative foundations: subjective experience of being subject to domination, disrespect, exclusion etc.