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*Thesis Eleven* 2012 111: 123

DOI: 10.1177/0725513612453426

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<http://the.sagepub.com/content/111/1/123.citation>

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# Debate about methods in the social sciences, especially the conception of social science method for which the Institute stands

Thesis Eleven  
111(1) 123–129  
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DOI: 10.1177/0725513612453426  
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*Institute for Social Research, Seminar of 17 January 1941*

*Horkheimer:* Today, the empiricists say that it is impossible to continue in a purely empiricist way. It is necessary to draw on theoretical points of view. On the other hand, there are people who totally reject empiricism. Now the American foundations want to see projects done that can serve as models for a methodology different from that which has been applied in this country up to the present. We are expected to supply a brief explanation of the way in which we understand the method of the social sciences.

*Neumann:* It is especially important that the explanation be formulated so as not to be Marxist.

*Horkheimer:* A widespread conception goes like this: We poor Americans may be industrious, know a lot, and possess good methods, but we have no great theoretical ideas. You Europeans arrive with your noses in the air and act as if you knew everything. What we expect from you are both the theoretical viewpoints that you have brought and their subjection to empirical testing – e.g. your conception of class struggle. Undertake research and show us that the class struggle does in fact have a decisive importance in the interpretation of contemporary social happenings. But these researches should go beyond the mere collection of materials. I believe (H.) that this point of view contains an error about the method.

*Neumann:* The general consensus is that it is necessary to have a working hypothesis, but it is not known how this can be discovered. That is [taken to be] a question of preference and attitude.

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*Horkheimer:* You are completely right that this is not our method. What is our method then? I would not deny that we also approach a given material with certain conceptions. This does not distinguish us from most Americans, although there are many Americans who have no conceptions beyond the method, but simply a research program.

*Gumperz:* We should not make things too easy for ourselves. This is not the case with leaders in the field.

*Horkheimer:* Quite likely not psychologically, but the[ir] theory shows that [the underlying conception] is not uncovered. There is contempt for the necessity adhering to the contents of the hypothesis, a necessity that applies beyond the sphere of the investigation.

*F. Weill:* Don't Americans simply reject all hypotheses and demand 'unbiased' approaches to their research?

*Adorno:* I think that it is as Gumperz says. The avant garde discuss hypotheses but the normal American 'research-men' are supposed to approach the matter 'unbiased' and they reject hypotheses.

*Neumann:* This trend is not preponderant any more.

*Adorno:* In the field of the social sciences, it certainly remains the case. Another American trend now cultivated is what is called content analysis, according to which one first analyzes the stimuli that influence the subjects. In my opinion, the theoretical approach does not go any further.

[Neumann cites the example of Thorsten Veblen: the great interest in him contradicts Adorno's thesis.]

*Adorno:* Veblen is considered a heretic.

*Gumperz:* Not any more. Veblen has become an academic deity in his lifetime, if also in a much revised and softened version, while he was earlier prevented from teaching.

*Horkheimer:* As far as I understand the theory that is generally accepted in this and other instances, it is the case that one has a hypothesis and attempts to order the facts on this foundation and that one then takes the instances that run against the hypothesis and reconstructs it accordingly.

*Neumann:* That is a widely prevalent trend. [Robert] Lynd's 'Knowledge for What?' already represents a declaration of war against it. The thesis is: nothing is gained through hypotheses. That is a positivistic method. It is necessary to extrapolate a value system out of the tendencies in American society.

*Gumperz:* ... but this is nothing but a repetition of Veblen's theory.

*Pollock:* [Wesley C.] Mitchell has spoken vehemently against it.<sup>1</sup>

*Gumperz:* ... but absolutely affirmed it [?] in his essays, etc.

*Horkheimer:* So how do things really look?

[Neumann offers an essay of [Max] Lerner as example: to construe contemporary problems so as to let the structure appear.]<sup>2</sup>

*Grossmann:* We are still faced with the task of formulating our method.

*Gumperz:* This cannot be done without confrontation with the other methods.

*H. Weill:* Every scientist has a longing to achieve understanding [*Erkenntnis*], but he is also, on the other hand, bound to the findings [*Erkenntnis*] of his researches. There can be no research without a yearning to know [*Wissensbegierde*].<sup>3</sup>

*Horkheimer:* Whatever we may work out as our method will also be contained in the method of American researchers. It is impossible to make a strict division. The question

is only whether we reach a more precise and better determination of our method than other people who have thought about method. I will try to set forth very simply the difference between the way we approach an inquiry and the way in which someone we find especially alien does so. It would never occur to us to construct a hypothesis because we find a quite specific state of the question [*Fragestellung*] already given. The question is posed: is bureaucracy in fact a new form of rule? We do not say then that bureaucracy is the form of rule and go on from there. We would rather revert to certain conceptions of society that we already possess and ask ourselves whether it is at all possible to say that something like bureaucracy can exercise actual power? Or: is bureaucracy a class? And we would probably tend to say that what is bureaucracy must be understood first of all as the transformational process of the ruling class during the past 50 years, and that what is [properly] called a ruling class is linked to the conception of economic relations that we already possess. The new facts enter into the inquiry in quite a different way. We would not take the trouble to collect an assortment of new facts but rather ask ourselves what is the concept of bureaucracy when you fill it with historical contents and hold it up against the experiences of the past 50 years. We can do that because we have a certain theory that unites us. The Americans lack a stock of theory on which they could draw. That also explains the helplessness whenever the question of defining a theme arises. The problem of method only comes up when there is not an extensive supply of understanding [*Erkenntnis*] already available (conflict problem). If we have a definite conception of what society is and what its tendencies are, no problem of method would arise if the question were posed whether a rule by bureaucracy could occur. – It seems to me, in sum, that one can conclude, first of all, that inquiries and the methods applied essentially depend on the extent to which a well developed theory of society is already at hand.

*Neumann*: That is fully in accord with my own views. The next difficulty is the difficulty of gaining an understanding. The objection will be made: what is correct about the theory on which you base yourselves? To come to such an understanding with the American who does not accept the theory is very difficult.

*Marcuse*: The state of the question [*Fragestellung*] is presented to us, so to speak, in the light of a certain experience. This experience is not however the experience on which the Positivists would call. What is the distinctive experience, then, on which we draw? What is it that we have already learned prior to this statement of the question [*Fragestellung*]?<sup>4</sup>

*Grossman*: We have a theory of a class society erected upon profit. If we take that as our point of departure, we see the clearly. How far this is true, we are also unable to say. We can either answer with Marx or we can say on the basis of historical experiences that this is substantiated, for example, by the class struggle.

*Horkheimer*: If you show up with evidence, you inevitably end up in a circle, since the evidence will inevitably contain elements that are just as uncertain. As soon as you arrive at decisive experiences, the other refuses to go along. Bourgeois society could almost be identified by the fact that the people share only the most pitiful impressions. But it is a matter of understanding, and when things are understood no one asks for proofs any more. Wherever structured experience is at issue [in our relations with these others], mutual understanding is cut off.

*Adorno*: So the outcome is the following situation: although we cannot get out of the circle of fact and hypothesis, and should thus not even let ourselves be ensnared by this issue, our theory can contribute, under appropriate circumstances, to our understanding of what determines the horizon of inquiry within which such questions of factual provability assert themselves. We are in a position to say what it means that people view that which can be comprehended by evidence as the last and ultimate. While we cannot by virtue of critical theory take on the burden of proof, we can start from there to roll up the postulates of Positivism.

*Horkheimer*: Why is proof demanded? What is their fear? It is this: 'If we no longer have the forcible separation of fact and hypothesis, humanism goes up in smoke. Humanity is at stake because it is necessary to be upright in science. One cannot treat as valid anything that is simply asserted. In contemporary society where there is no truth, we must be careful to avoid a return to the abandonment of criteria.'

*Adorno*: Since we do not go along with this separation, we need have no fear of the fact. As dialecticians, we can come to an agreement with positivists on one point. What we have to do is not somehow to approach reality with ready-made hypotheses or systems in order to verify them. I would take up the proposed concepts anew, analyze them, and realize that the concept has indeed been defined but not thought through, being subject rather to a historical presupposition. I would carefully scrutinize all the concepts that emerge until the concepts themselves become fluid. What is new in this is that with such a critique we know what our aim is. It makes a big difference, however, if I begin in the sense of a hypothesis or finished theory, or if I am able to think so as to mobilize the force of theory. It is the driving force.

*Neumann*: That is all very convincing, but a vicious circle for an American.

*Marcuse*: We are supposed to say in three pages what our method looks like, but we have only criticized the others instead of examining our own method.

*H. Weil*: If we want to instruct people in the usefulness of our theory from our new observation point, it is best to state it as simply as possible, as if anyone could do it. Science is something – whether one wants it to be so or not – that can only thrive on a large scale, and if we want to enter into the game we can accomplish this only insofar as we think over the extent to which we are in a position to present it to the others so that they can understand it. It is a part of this that we hold certain concepts back [*festhalten*] for the sake of communications.<sup>5</sup>

*Neumann*: This is not about working out our own method but about the question, 'How do I tell this to the children?' Until now we have been satisfied to say that we seek to integrate all the social sciences. That does not suffice. The question is whether we can present our method so as to attack the hypothesis-fact problem. We distinguish ourselves from sociology in that we view all phenomena as historical phenomena, which the Americans do not do. We must emphasize that we are not engaged in sociological but in social-scientific work, and we must explain this. The difference is enormous, and we must show this.

*Horkheimer*: If we treat the problem as Neumann wants, something not quite fair will come out of it, in that we will again say something that in our opinion is not actually decisive. The others have a right to learn something of what makes up our distinctive spirit. (We do not understand history as [James Thomas] Shotwell does; we do not do sociology but social sciences.) To bring out this unique element is very difficult, but it

would be very nice if we could succeed in transmitting to the outside world something of the fact that in our opinion truth cannot be social-scientifically split into parts.

*Gumperz*: That truth is not verifiable.

*Horkheimer*: Once you begin with verifiability you may well say that worry about verifiability is a worry that often castrates the enterprise of knowledge [*Wissenschaft*]. For if I already split [it] into separate sciences, and then these sciences as well into separate elements . . . and beyond that one must also have thoughts and ideas.

*Neumann*: But the Americans also say that insights are not rendered false just because it is not possible to verify them.

*Marcuse*: First of all we must ask further how the experiences to which we appeal actually look.

*Adorno*: The project of showing how the distinction can be made already entails the theory as a whole. You can attempt such an undertaking, as long as you remain true to the dialectic, only if you refer such expressions to totality, even in the case of lies.

*Horkheimer*: The distinguishing feature of science is communicability. It seems as if at present that which is most false is also most communicable. The demand for comprehensibility is best satisfied by Hitler. The focus of the discussion is that it is said that one can sense a certain mistrust within the present-day social sciences. Is it possible to make some improvements in this? I wouldn't even open up the question of verifiability . . . it is quite secondary. The fact is that what is evil in fascism evidently rests in the fact that the experiences of most humans are faultily structured today, that truth and comprehensible messages are confused with one another, as well as immediate accessibility and truth. Communications are confused with contents in a mode that no longer requires thinking for oneself.

*Seidenmann*: The individual moments must be set forth. It would be the task to show which moments are comprehended and true within our own theory, and that the theory would be altogether impossible without such truth. Then it must be shown why history, for example, is essential to the theory to be presented.

*Neumann*: An anti-pluralist posture appears very important to me.

*Horkheimer*: The difference between sociology or the social sciences and what we do lies in that at least the American social sciences investigate recurrent happenings, and that they are in a certain sense natural sciences. For example, they are supposed to answer questions that cause problems in this society, which can in turn be solved by the intervention of administrators or the like, on the basis of the researches undertaken by the social sciences. The problem of bureaucracy [for example]: one establishes the tendencies of the bureaucracy and shows how the rule of the bureaucracy can be contained.

*Marcuse*: Our experience sees reality in the light of these experiences. Our theory is essentially a theory of transformation [*Veränderung*].

*Horkheimer*: The distinction should be worked out.

*F. Weil*: But we would have to say something about our conception of history and the like.

*Marcuse*: A theory of transformation would have to be set against the theory of order.

*Neumann*: Order and transformation are not contradictories.

*Marcuse*: The concept of 'social change' (sic) is a pure concept of order.

*Neumann*: Theory of transformation cannot be translated by 'theory of change' (sic).

*Horkheimer*: In the concept of transformation there are two themes that we should hold apart: (1) transformation in the sense of change (sic) and (2) dynamism, transformation without end.

*Adorno*: Method is really the substantive, complete understanding.

*Horkheimer*: What the American wants from us is that we work on a small topic in a way that reveals our entire line of approach. I believe that we can see something very positive in this. Investigations of small spheres of objects in which it can be shown that when I deal with a sphere this one aspect is illuminated without treating of the entire world.

*Adorno*: What distinguishes us from [social?] science is that, while it registers uncounted facts and codifies them and always has them at its disposal, it always in a sense forgets again what it has already possessed. It can repeatedly incorporate earlier results in a new investigation, but the manner in which it now thinks is indifferent to the fact that it has earlier come to know something. For us, in contrast, everything that once was there represents a continuity.

*Horkheimer*: We should present what we call theory in several decisive moments. Each individual inquiry should have a certain character as key to the total situation. Someone who reads it can then see that a challenge is being laid down here that is not satisfied in the average social sciences.

*Pollock*: Something must be said about the question of value freedom in science. This is taken to mean that every inquiry, regardless of its field, is equally justified, as long as it employs certain methods. We should take a stand on this. This question is long settled for us, but it is still at the center here.

*Adorno*: If we set forth our point of view, it is necessary to proceed in so differentiated a manner that it is true. We must say at this point that we reject value freedom as well as a science oriented to certain so-called values.

*Horkheimer*: We will not be able to say the most decisive thing: that we ultimately take the search for knowledge so seriously that the decision about our life and a shift in our entire life depend on it. That theory is connected to practice and that when our understanding is changed, our practice changes too. Practical and political seriousness still adheres to science for us. The difference between the American and the European is that for us science is philosophy. It is possible to act on the basis of religious belief, purely subjective and unconnected value judgments, or theory and understanding. This is what makes these people so uneasy.

*Translated from the German by David Kettler and Thomas Wheatland*

## Acknowledgement

This debate originally appeared in: Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 12: Nachgelassene Schriften 1931-1949*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr © 1985 S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt am Main. All rights reserved, S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt am Main.

## Notes

1. Since Mitchell was a disciple of both Dewey and Veblen and expressly rejected the method of testing hypotheses, Pollock's reference (like those of Neumann and Gumperz) is probably to the 'theory' that Horkheimer characterizes, although the sequel leaves the matter unclear

2. It is unclear why this and the preceding interventions by Neumann are not given verbatim: perhaps he spoke at length.
3. The uncolloquial translations of the key terms appear to be required by the overall sense of the observation: there could not be a tension between the two instances of '*Erkenntnis*' if the same concept were intended by the term, and 'curiosity' at the conclusion would not carry the weight placed on the term in this statement.
4. To translate *eine Fragestellung* as *a problematic* is to introduce an alien concept naturalized into English in a theoretical context considerably different from the present use, and generally rather opaque. Admittedly the ways in which Institute members equate theoretical frame and state of the question skips a step or two, but the relationship in their minds appears to be a functional one.
5. The German expression *festhalten* would more commonly mean to retain or even to hold fast to something, but that would make little sense in this statement, and the less common meaning proposed here is certainly possible