

Introduction

Cybernetic Society and the Crisis of Modernity

Seen from the point of view of its supporters over the course of the past two centuries, the project of modernity was always centered on the premise that rational, self-legislating individuals were capable of generating self-government and cultivating moral personhood. Even for those who took the view that each person is essentially a social and cooperative being, the individual was still the crucible for any understanding of modern, rational forms of politics and ethics. Modernity was to create a world where the powers of irrational tradition, superstition, and illegitimate authority would be questioned, where public reason could generate binding norms and institutions. At the center of this Enlightenment project was the concept of *judgment*, or the capacity to discern which norms, laws, institutions, and social ends were rational, worthy of justification and obligation, and which did not deserve this endorsement and even those which warranted dissent and disobedience.

This project is now seriously in question. This book proceeds from the premise that modern society is quickly losing its sense of vision of the purposes and potentialities of political life, that it is in fact losing its capacity for critical judgment. Concepts such as the common interest have been all but banished from the realm of modern political philosophy and consigned to the abstract preferences of the individual. In its place, we have been asked to accept a theory of politics that rests on consensus, agreement, and intersubjectivity; a theory of politics and judgment that seeks out sociality with others as a matter of the exchange of reasons rather than an object with its own dynamics and features. This theory is based on pluralism, tolerance, and mutual

understanding. Although codified in volume after volume of contemporary political philosophy, it is profoundly detached from the actual dynamics of power that shape the contours of the real world. In a more philosophical sense, it fails as a guide for human societies seeking to judge and even transform their collective ethical life. Even more, I believe it has distracted us from more pressing questions about the nature of political life and practical reason, from the deep structures of our social world that generate personal and social pathologies, and from a tradition of thought that saw the structure of society as a whole, as a totality, as the primary object of concern for political thought and emancipatory critique. The collapse of Western humanistic ideas that accompanied the destructive events of the first half of the twentieth century have led to a fear of discussing any kind of concrete nature of the good, freedom, or justice. Instead, we are now asked to commit to a more cautious, more academic model of ethics and politics. It is a model of democratic reason that, as I see it, is not up to the task of critical reason and is instead an unwitting legitimating logic for the most subtle and yet pervasive forms of social power.

From its origins in the Enlightenment, the concept of modern democratic life was seen to be based on the capacity of agents to reflect rationally on their world and the kinds of norms and institutions that constituted it. As religion and other forms of traditional authority were gradually displaced in terms of political power by an alternative rational agency, the modes of thought and life that bound humans to rigid authority structures and hierarchies seemed to be collapsing. What essentially destroyed the social basis for premodern forms of authority, however, was also the soil for a new form of social power and dominance. The destruction of premodern ethical life was not replaced with a thorough, rational alternative. The gradual erosion of religion's capacity for serving as a cohesive ground for ethical life was sensed by thinkers like Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, among others. They saw that a more rational alternative for ethics and value was possible: one that would be rooted in a concept of social reason where each member was able to think in terms of a rational, general will and freedom would be found in the self-consciousness of this new, expanded conception of personhood. What they could not have anticipated was the technological transformation of economic life oriented toward generating surplus and the repatterning of society and self that came with it. This set the

stage for the derailment of the project to construct a viable alternative to premodern, pre-Enlightenment ethical life and value systems.

The search for such an alternative nevertheless continued in different forms—some rational and progressive, others reactionary—well into the present. But our time has been shaped by a structure of thought that was constructed largely in the post-World War II period. This way of thinking can be characterized by a noumenal model of sociality where individuals exchange reasons and justify their normative commitments to one another. The model is built off of the scaffolding of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment mixed with twentieth-century philosophies of language. What has resulted is a dominant approach to ethics that misses any concrete conceptualizations of the good and ethical judgment. My central thesis in this book is that this project has failed to provide an adequate theory of ethics and judgment and that a more critical conception of political judgment is in fact necessary. It is necessary because the prevailing theoretical ideas and figures that have dominated the past several decades in academic discourse have become increasingly sealed off from the mechanisms of the real world and how power, consciousness, and society have been transformed by a resurgent form of administration and a technological form of capitalism. The fate of the individual and of individual judgment have been at the mercy of the formative pressures of social integration that undermine the capacity to think outside of the parameters of this integration. What has resulted is a withered form of critical reason and a denatured moral agency rapidly losing the capacity to protest the imperatives of cybernetic mechanisms of conformity and control.

One of the core theses of this book is that modern citizens are losing the capacity for critical political judgment understood as the ability to grasp and dissent from the dominant logics of power relations that make up modern society. Even more, the eroding capacity for judgment contributes to a new kind of politics and culture, one where democratic ideas of solidarity, the common good, and democratic equality are replaced by identity with one's group membership. The ideas that dominate what passes for political judgment in the literature are not equipped for restoring this capacity or a culture of it in modern politics because it remains caught in a theoretical paradigm that cannot account for how the ontological structures of society deplete our critical capacity to comprehend it and judge it. This is not meant

to imply that we have all become automata, lacking ethical values or capacity for evaluative reason. Rather, I suggest that we have lost a basic form of ethical coherence with respect to how the power structures of our world have been shaped. We lack not simply judgment but *critical* judgment: the capacity to question the social totality and how it shapes and patterns the world we experience phenomenologically. Critical judgment, as I reconstruct it, must have in view some sense of what forms of human sociality promote self-development and freedom and which ones do not. Critical judgment must be able to penetrate the appearances of our inherited world and grasp the essence of our species-specific dynamics. Only then can we shatter the reifying pull of the highly technical, administrative mass society that seeks to fold each of us into its manifold logic.

Central to my thesis is that two forces have shaped modern society from the middle of the nineteenth century through today. First is the gradual technical patterning of the world, originating in the constant search for efficiency in production logics and the management of large-scale production and consumption regimes. These logics become ever more deeply constitutive of the individual as they colonize what were previously distinct spheres of culture and life. Second is a reaction, in many ways, to this trend: the increasing subjectification and particularization of ethical values and concepts of the “good.” With the phrase “specter of Babel,” I am denoting the potential reality of a society fragmenting along the lines of identity, culture, religion, ethnicity (or whatever axis we wish to insert) that generates a particularist field of ethical value—a society that no longer has self-understanding of its collective good and that allows each particular subgroup to turn inward and lose sight of the importance of the common interest. As a result, each individual increasingly comes to see the world in terms of their particular worldviews rather than in terms of common social patterns that affect all members of society. Whereas the project of postwar liberalism was to construct a moral-political framework for a pluralistic society in the face of modernity’s collapse of a common ethical life and substantive political vision, it has instead given rise to a dearth of critical consciousness in the face of an increasingly powerful cybernetic society that has expanded the powers of private wealth and capital.

Although, on one hand, there has been an increasingly cohesive knitting together of our lives under the auspices of technical and administrative institutional logics, each person searches for meaning in

a world increasingly devoid of any meaning. Two forces exert pressure on our practical reasoning: the increasing technical mastery of our lives by the rationalized logics of power, and an increasing subjectification of value even as our powers of critical and moral reasoning are flattened by technical integration. The search for a common life with others, a kind of society that could realize a common good, is undermined by the atomized individual seeking their own conception of the good. The more that these mutually reinforcing trends increase in their potency, the more that critical judgment loses contact with the emancipatory goals of the Enlightenment and reflects the defective reality principle of the present. I see the tension between these two forces of modern life as the essential problematic of modern culture and modern philosophy. Let me explore these forces in turn.

The increasing search for efficiency in production and social stability in modern capitalist societies has manifested a deepening of the social logics of administrative-rational authority and extended technical logics that have had deep effects on the nature of subjectivity. These social changes have only led to an increasing tendency of subjectivity to be routinized into power relations and forms of authority that are largely internalized but resonant with the imperatives and normative structures of production and consumption. Substantive cultural differences in terms of value orientations and worldviews become eroded as people become guided more by external logics, norms, and rule-following. The result has been less and less use of the individual is evaluative and cognitive capacities and an increasing reliance on external, indeed, heteronomous systems for social action.¹ This has been the result of how the productive powers of the machine have been able to pattern the life of human beings. Not just the machine as a concrete object but also the socially autonomous logic of capital seeks its own expansion of surplus extraction and the instrumentalization of all social, natural, and cultural entities for that purpose.

I refer to this sociological transformation of social systems and culture as the *cybernetic society* because it manifests the characteristics of a self-regulating, governing system. The problem with this image of modern society is that it represses the true nature of our social order.

1. I have explored this phenomenon elsewhere as a form of alienation. See Michael J. Thompson, "Alienation as Atrophied Moral Cognition and its Impact on Social Behavior." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2013): 301–21.

Far from being “self-regulating” and “autonomous” from individual human will, it exists and persists due to the socialized conformity and absorption of the individual into the collective processes and logics of the social system as a whole—a social system that is steered and organized as much as possible by elites with economic power and increasingly oligarchic control over material and institutional resources. The individual is in effect “piloted” through much of their substantive social activities by the internalized norms that have been articulated by highly rationalized forms of institutional authority, crowding out nonformal structures of life. The word “cybernetic” is derived from the Greek verb κυβερνάω, which means “to pilot” or “to steer,” which in Latin was translated as *gubernare*, from which we get the term “to govern.” Resonant in the semantics of this term is the idea that “cybernetics” refers to the means by which the components of complex systems are directed and steered. Applied to modern society, this entails the spread of instrumental logics that subsume noninstrumental spheres of life, action, and consciousness. As capital and technical reason widen their scope of subsumption of subjective patterns of thought and feeling and make them resonant with their own ends and means, cybernetic society can be seen to emerge.

This transformation of modern society has had deleterious effects on the structure of the individual and the capacity of critical consciousness to resist the pressures of conformity that emanate from the cybernetic patterns of social reality. More crucially, the individual becomes alienated from the processes that dominate the life-world and, as a result, seeks refuge in one’s “particularity.” Ideas like this go back to the origins of mass society. Georg Simmel, writing in the early twentieth century, formulated the outlines of such a description of society as a “culture which outgrows all personal life.” He continues:

Here in buildings and educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technology, in the formations of community life, and in the visible institutions of the state, is offered such an overwhelming fullness of crystallized and impersonalized spirit that the personality, so to speak, cannot maintain itself under its impact. . . . They carry the person as if in a stream, and one needs hardly to swim for oneself. On the other hand, however, life is composed more and more of these impersonal contents and offerings

which tend to displace the genuine personal colorations and incomparabilities. This results in the individual's summoning the utmost in uniqueness and particularization, in order to preserve his most personal core.²

Simmel's thesis of what he called the crisis of culture was that the powers of modern society were outstripping a person's capacity to comprehend the whole. As such, as the "hypertrophy" of technologically complex society increased, so did the "atrophy" of the subject's individual cognitive and moral-evaluative powers. Key to this is the rise of a certain kind of technical-instrumental reason that has become constitutive of the institutional and administrative life of modern subjects. It is a centripetal force that socializes our subjectivity to its own objectivity. Its norms colonize our practices, and as a result, ethical reflection and judgment begin to wither. The cybernetic society therefore must be seen as more than the communicative model of information exchange to capture a new form of administrative governance, a new kind of highly integrated, patterned form of behavior and consciousness. As Norbert Wiener, one of the founders of cybernetics, once put it:

When I give an order to a machine, the situation is not essentially different from that which arises when I give an order to a person. In other words, as far as my consciousness goes I am aware of the order that has gone out and of the signal of compliance that has come back. To me, personally, the fact that the signal in its intermediate stages has gone through a machine rather than through a person is irrelevant and does not in any case greatly change my relation to the signal. . . . It is the purpose of Cybernetics to develop a language and techniques that will enable us indeed to attack the problem of control and communication in general, but also to find the proper repertory of ideas and techniques to classify their particular manifestations under certain concepts.³

2. Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 422.

3. Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1954), 16–17.

Social power now becomes a function of *compliance*—compliance to a system that has its own autonomous logic within which human culture becomes embedded. Wiener’s conflation of the person and the machine, which he took to be a fear of the future rather than a prescription for it, is no exaggeration. The development of modern techniques of power, production, and consumption now become tracks for the development of the subject’s cognitive, evaluative, and cathectic ego-structure. The highly patterned, machine-like construction of administered institutional life socializes even the most recalcitrant among us into its fields of operation. The result of this has been an acute decline in the capacity for critical judgment—practical and political. The intense cybernetic patterning of social life is accompanied by an intensification of the reification of consciousness—not only its cognitive and epistemic capacities but also its moral-evaluative powers.

The cybernetic society is therefore only possible once technical means of control and command have become routinized and rational authority has become reified in consciousness as the routinization of technical forms of control and administrative operationality has saturated socializing institutions. Indeed, Jacques Ellul saw this occurring in what he called “automatism of technical choice”:

When everything has been measured and calculated mathematically so that the method which has been decided upon is satisfactory from the rational point of view, the method is manifestly the most efficient of all those hitherto employed of those in competition with it, then the technical movement becomes self-directing, I call the process of *automatism*.⁴

As the institutional context of society becomes more automatic and self-regulating, so do the structures of the self and subjectivity. As Kenneth Thompson has insightfully pointed out: “The more socialization into institutions is effective, the more predictable and controlled conduct will be.”⁵ The implications of this transformation and intensification of technical manipulation and control on the individual is immense.

4. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 79–80.

5. Kenneth Thompson, “Organizations as Constructors of Social Reality,” in Graeme Salaman and Kenneth Thompson (eds.), *Control and Ideology in Organizations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980), 218.

Particularly important is the effect it has on our practical lives. With the regularity and efficiency of the internalization of institutionalized norms generated by administrative-capitalist society comes the erosion of personal spontaneity and critical thought. Emile Durkheim correctly saw the problem: "If we live amorally for a good part of the day, how can we keep the springs of morality from going slack on us? . . . The unleashing of economic interests has been accompanied by debasing of public morality."⁶

Perhaps one of the most pervasive effects of the gradual emergence of the cybernetic society is that a new kind of integration between the self and the institutions of the techno-administrative apparatus of modernity has taken place. It is not only in the suppression of critical-evaluative faculties of the person but also the problem that the essential reality of what human sociality is has become increasingly hidden from view. Our social world more and more takes on the shape of an autonomous machine separate from the actual human practices and relations that constitute it. Even more, as hierarchies of wealth and technical knowledge ramp up, the control of various social system becomes wrested from democratic and popular control and increasingly co-opted by economic and technical elites. Add to this the fact that the purposes and legitimate ends of the polity, economy, and culture are becoming recoded by the imperatives of a cybernetic society fused to surplus accumulation at all costs. We are witnessing a great reversal of the Enlightenment project where society would finally be emancipated from superstition and autocracy and become the legitimate manifestation of the common interest of a free citizenry. It is not some dialectic of the Enlightenment that has effected this historical shift but a failure of its most mature and developed humanistic and democratic principles to transform consciousness and society.

The crucial thing to keep in mind is that despite this increasing social integration at the systematic level of society, this does entail a uniformly conformist culture. The second, centrifugal force in modern society, as I pointed out, is the reaction spawned by the increasing tendencies of the centripetal force of the cybernetic society. We can see this as the turn inward and the search for meaning and identity—but a form of meaning and identity that, as Simmel had already observed, is particular in nature, which means that it is detached from

6. Emile Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 12.

the social world and a construct of one's fragmented worldview. As the institutions governing society become more saturated by technical and cybernetic mechanisms of socialization, control, and social reproduction, the individual has increasingly sought refuge in the self. Hence we see the postmodernist's attack against modern rationalism, the retreat into identity as a search for meaning and "authenticity," the narcissistic exploration of self, return to religious traditions, and other expressions of anti-Enlightenment impulse. This leads me to the second force to which I alluded: the tendency for atomized individuals to search for their own conceptions of the good and moral meaning. With the erosion of traditional and conventional collective forms of meaning, Enlightenment rationality had attempted to provide a rational philosophical alternative for practical reasoning and subjective meaning. But the crisis of this project was already evident by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Max Weber lamented what he saw to be the eclipse of the possibility for an "authentic modernity," or a kind of secularized Protestant notion of conscience grounded in rational, evaluative self-reflection.

What has declined in modern culture is the existence of a kind of personal life that is emancipated from premodern forms of cultural belonging and conventional communal worldviews. Instead, political and ethical energy has been invested in fragmented forms of life that cybernetic society has left in its wake. I use the phrase "personal life" in the sense employed by Eli Zaretsky, who argues: "By personal life I mean the experience of having an identity distinct from one's place in the family, in society, and in the social division of labor."⁷ Modernity and its social-structural shifts therefore freed the individual from traditional forms of community and communal worldviews. But it also placed the burden of ethical meaning back onto the self. As Zaretsky argues, "Personal identity became a problem and a project for individuals as opposed to something given to them by their place in the family or the community."⁸ Although the phenomenon of "defamilization," or "the freeing of individuals from unconscious images of authority originally rooted in the family,"⁹ was indeed emancipating, the problem has been

7. Eli Zaretsky, *Political Freud: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 20.

8. Zaretsky, *Political Freud*, 20.

9. Zaretsky, *Political Freud*, 21.

that a genuinely modern system of a ethical life—one where categories of human freedom and common interest can be formulated—has been unable to emerge.

Instead, the cybernetic society has crowded out and made obsolete most objective forms of ethical life, which in turn has placed pressure on individuals to find meaning or collapse into some form of nihilism or, in another sense, merely personalized forms of meaning. An age that celebrates the “market” and the entrepreneur, that sees the symbolic valences of culture as more explanatory of power and freedom than the architectonics of material power, was bound to grind up the frames of political meaning and judgment needed for taking on an era of oligarchic capitalism and the vertiginous forms of inequality and its attendant democratic deficits to which previous movements for social justice had access.¹⁰ This takes various forms from a narrow egoism to a return to conventional forms of meaning and tradition, religion, mysticism, or identity politics and group narcissism. In the end, the decline of critical personhood has also meant the expansion of the cybernetic society and the fragmentation of ethical life. The cybernetic society represses the reality of the interdependent social relations, practices, and structures that produce and sustain it. It is dependent on a false ontology rooted in neo-Hobbesian ideas about human life that posit atomized individuals in search of particular interests and desires. There can be no common good other than the negative freedom ensured by a social contract between persons of differing value spheres. A *modus vivendi* of atomized subjects seeking their own values of the good rather than a common life is to be the lot of modernity.

In terms of contemporary philosophy and political theory in particular, this has led to a paradigm shift toward a “postmetaphysical” conception of practical judgment and reason. According to this

10. Daniel T. Rodgers describes this shift as an “age of fracture” and describes it by arguing that: “Concepts of power became more subtle, more intangibly imagined, and harder to pin down. Identity loomed larger than ever before: not as a collective given, now, but as a field of malleability and self-fashioning. The categories of race, class, and gender, after sweeping into academic discourse in the early 1980s, turned less distinct, disaggregated into subcategories and intersections of categories, or slipped into quotation marks. . . . Individualized and privatized, released of its larger burdens, freedom was cut loose from the burdens and responsibilities that had once so closely accompanied it.” *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press, 2011), 39–40.

conception, our normative propositions should be considered rational and valid only when they can achieve agreement among participants through an exchange of reasons or some other collective procedure. The rationality or validity of ethical propositions must be looked at not in terms of their content but in terms of their pragmatic formulation. The rejection of metaphysics *tout court* is now heralded as the emancipation of thought from any form of heteronomy or foundation. We are no longer to look at what human beings are, what capacities they have as a species, and how actually existing social forms either enhance or degrade those capacities. But concepts such as freedom or power need to be grasped as ontological categories: as concepts that have social-structural and normative and practical dimensions; as constitutive of the symbolic registers of consciousness. Instead, we are now asked to look at how we communicate or intersubjectively come to consensus over norms. Supposedly, the result of this move is the capacity for a fully constructivist form of democratic life, but it can be argued that what has really been achieved is the gutting of critical judgment and any satisfying theory of ethical life. What it lacks is a more complete and comprehensive understanding of human sociality.

Political liberalism, in its various forms, has essentially become the ethical-political paradigm for this phase of modernity. Despite their important differences, theories of ethics and political philosophies from John Rawls to Jürgen Habermas, and their myriad acolytes, have viewed the idea of an intersubjective, pragmatic, and nonmetaphysical view of values as the core way to deal with the decline of premodern expressions of common and organic values and ethical systems. But this has come at a price: the move toward the postmetaphysical inspired by Kant no longer sees society as an object with concrete features and dynamics. Practical reason is now to take the form of a proceduralism that reopens the chasm between the noumenal realm of values and their embodiment in concrete social forms. In place of seeing values such as the good, freedom, justice, and so on in ontological terms—that is, as manifesting certain embodied forms of social relations, processes, and ends—we are to determine them via pragmatic discussions leading toward either an overlapping consensus or universal agreement. Either way, the actual relations we should strive for, the kinds of social ends and purposes that ought to be set for our associational lives together, are now ejected from the horizon of practical reason.

Perhaps more problematic, the postmetaphysical paradigm in ethics and judgment is unable to deal with the problems of reification and relativism—relativism because it cannot secure cultural norms and practices from being immune to critique, and reification because it cannot secure the intersubjective “space of reasons” from itself being colonized by the cognitive and normative patterns of thought shaped by the cybernetic society. There is no way to ensure that the members of any pragmatic exchange are not simply reproducing the very categories that render the status quo legitimate and that reconstitute that social reality. Relativism is another problem because simply relying on reason exchange does not give us criteria for which reasons should count and which should not. There is no way to call a reason into question other than from another perspectival stance. But we cannot rest with such a limited and, to be frank, academicized model of human sociality. Politics is not group therapy, we are not “situated selves.” Reason achieves critical valence and power when it can press the given world that we inhabit into new shapes and new modes of being. What is required is that our reasons grip the constitutive powers of the social world and their capacity to shape consciousness and reflection; what is also needed is a kind of practical reason that can articulate an ethical life promoting the ontological social structures, processes, ends, and purposes that are constitutive of a free and rational form of society.

As I see it, the importance of an ontological approach to society and ethical value is that it grants our normative reflections a foundation that is neither external to our social being in the form of some kind of inflated metaphysics (God or some eternal principles deduced from abstract reasoning) nor posited from some immutable source, such as nature. Instead, the thesis is that human beings do have certain essential dynamics or features, such as relational sociality, and that we need to see that any social reality possesses certain common features: relational structures, norms, processes, and ends or purposes that define them. The relevant space for critical judgment is the ensemble of ontological features that any society manifests. The key, indeed, critical idea here is that once we grasp the thesis that our social reality is the objectification of our associative and practical forms of life, we are in a position to inquire into whether these social forms maximize freedom as a concrete, objective condition of our sociality. Once we make this philosophical shift, we begin to see that the ontic manifestations of our reality can be

pried open to reveal the forms of dominance, exploitation, oppression, and so on that constitute it.

The ontological approach I advocate here applies critical reason to the objective conditions of our world, revealing how the norms, values, and concepts we employ may sustain or enhance an unjust and freedom-attenuating social reality. Reason itself is seen as having a metaphysical structure: valid reasons, reasons that count, in other words, are those that are not only what we agree on as a result of reasoned agreement; it must also count because its embodiment in the world will objectify forms of free sociality that have developmental ends for the community as a whole and each individual member. Rational social freedom must be seen as embodied in the collective norms, relations, practices, purposes, and ends that serve as the infrastructure to our social reality. At the same time, it brings to consciousness the potentiality inherent within the ontology of our relational and practical lives undermining the defective structures and norms that sustain domination and subordination to elite interests and ends. It may be true that there are no timeless external foundations for human value and knowledge. But it does not follow that there is no internal ensemble of capacities that serve as the infrastructure for our ethical and political lives. The error of this kind of thinking is to posit a dualism between the world of value and the domain of social reality. Breaking down this dichotomy reveals a new ontological framework for judgment and ethics. Value should be seen as having an ontological ground that grants us a synthesis of our critical-cognitive faculties with the normative-evaluative framework for social criticism.

What all of this means for those seeking to understand the question of political judgment is that we must look anew at the question that was passed over long ago: that of the relation between ethics and social existence or, to put it in terms I will use in this book, between value and social ontology. A central thesis I will defend is that without any sense of cognitive comprehension of the ontological shapes of our sociality, our capacity for critical judgment will be increasingly weakened by the cybernetic forces of modernity. Even more, what manifests itself as practical reasoning will continue to fragment and either retreat into the abstractions of irrationalism or simply come to resonate with the “natural” facticity of the prevailing social reality. In either case, what will be lost is a concrete, critical conception of ethics and a rational-critical capacity for critical judgment. The project

of antifoundationalism and postmetaphysics has led to an incoherence of critical reason as well as a debasement of a more critical, radical alternative structure of thought rooted in what I describe as a critical social ontological perspective on practical rationality, ethics and judgment. As I see it, critical judgment can only be animated by rational and democratic aims when it can comprehend and resonate with the actual social-relational structures of human life and diagnose how the actually existing forms of life that we inhabit either inhibit or develop our ontological potentialities and potency.

As I see it, the move to pragmatism, Kantianism, and the “linguistic” turn all fail to provide us with a valid critical framework for judgment. Its self-confident emphasis on formal reason, intersubjective praxis, and nonfoundationalism take for granted a rational, normatively critical model of personhood devoid of the pathological effects on the self rooted in cybernetic forms of social power: one not afflicted by reification, alienation, conformity to deontic norms of rational domination, and so on. One of the core reasons for this is that they are unable to immunize reflective thought from the constitutive logics of modern forms of social power. Indeed, the cybernetic dynamics of modern society were something to which thinkers like Arendt, Habermas, and Honneth have sought to react. Their theories of social action were conceived as responses and alternatives to instrumental reason. But in their move to forms of truth rooted in intersubjectivity, they have been unable to secure this kind of rationality from the introjection of social norms and values into the background conditions of consciousness of participants in social action. Put differently, what I call constitutive social power is that capacity for social institutions to shape the internal normative values and collective-intentional norms that grant those institutions their existence and their legitimacy.¹¹ Constitutive power is thus a crucial problem in the depletion of critical judgment in modern societies and the breakdown of a common ethical framework for the comprehension of social justice.

11. See my discussion of “constitutive domination” in Michael J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), and Michael J. Thompson, “A Functionalist Theory of Social Domination.” *Journal of Political Power*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2013): 179–99. Also see the development of this thesis by Neal Harris, “Beyond Recognition: A Critique of Contemporary Social Pathology Diagnosis,” Ph.D. diss., University of Sussex, 2019.

The postmetaphysical claim, by contrast, asks us to consider thinking about our practical lives—as Hannah Arendt has called it, “thinking differently without a banister.” Tracy Strong speaks for many when he advocates a conception of political judgment that has no foundation and rests on no positing of truth claims. Rather, the concept of the “political” becomes a stand-in for ethical life more generally. Strong is correct when he asserts, “The underlying premise here is that, to the degree that moral principles are derived not from this world but from something beyond it (whether this be a Platonic or a theological realm), the events of the twentieth century have made the belief in or the acceptance of such principles impossible for any person who faces the world as it has shown itself.”¹² However, this should not entail a move to a vague and indeterminate form of political and ethical life. The alternative, that of the “political,” must also be rejected as an academic construct emerging from a phenomenological and existentialist incapacity to deal with modernity. Because “the political rests on nothing other than acknowledging and being acknowledged,”¹³ it simply cannot provide a framework for the powerful forms of domination exhibited by the cybernetic society, nor does it provide some kind of normative framework for ontological validity: that is, for giving us some coherence with respect to what should count as valid normative reasons and what should not.

For this reason, I want to lay the groundwork for an alternative conception of ethics and practical reason. Broadly construed, the two approaches to ethics that have dominated philosophical reflection has been either a formalist or a substantivist ethics. Formalism in ethics entails relying on procedures for determining the validity of any ethical proposition or value. This could be purely cognitive, as in Kantian ethics, where the formula of the categorical imperative is determinative for rational (and hence valid) ethical postulates, or it can be discursive, in which case mutual agreement and the procedures for discourse are determinative of validity. Contrast to this a substantivist conception of ethics that seeks to root the validity of any ethical premise in the traditions, beliefs, or practices of a given community. My proposition here

12. Tracy B. Strong, *Politics without Vision: Thinking without a Banister in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 375.

13. Strong, *Politics without Vision*, 391.

is the construction of an ontological ethics, or an objective ethics, that seeks to root our normative space of reasons in the actual sociopractical reality of human life. According to this ontological account of value, validity cannot be determined arbitrarily via some decision procedure or discourse because we cannot secure that space of reasons from the infiltration of power relations on our evaluative capacities, what I call the reification problem. Even more, substantive ethics simply rest on the content of what a given community does and has no means to gain critical distance from those values and practices and call them into question, or what I call the relativism problem.

In contrast to these approaches, throughout this study I adhere to the Enlightenment concept of the universality of reason and the Hegelian-Marxist conviction that a more concrete system of ethical life can emerge. I think this project can be made meaningful once we see that a modern form of sociality can only be generated by critical subjects. Through a new way of looking at ethics and value, we will be able to reclaim a sense of political and ethical judgment that will not only confront forms of social and political power and domination but also articulate new forms of a meaningful and just life. This can come about, I suggest, once we shift our perspective toward a critical social ontology: that is, a paradigm shift that asks us to take into consideration how our ethical life should be rooted in the ontological capacities of human social being and how social forms of life can be seen to either enhance or stunt those capacities and forms of self-development. As I see it, this was the basic paradigm that united a specific strand in political philosophy stretching from Aristotle to Rousseau to Marx. I seek to revive this paradigm and use it against what I see to be a failed theory of politics and ethics in the form of postmetaphysics.

Briefly put, the alternative I offer is rooted in a different structure of thought, one that I call the social-ontological theory of value and the metaphysical structure of reason. A critical social ontology is able to have in view the phylogenetic capacities of humans, as possessing capacities for relations and the practical realization of ends and purposes in the world. At the same time, it has in view how individuals are ontogenetically shaped by the prevailing forms of social relations, structures, processes, and ends that any given society exhibits. According to this view, judgment asks us to see the social world as a totality, as a whole within which the experiences, practices, and norms that

govern our lives are rooted. Critical consciousness can only overcome the powerful pull of the reification of consciousness that is constituted by cybernetic society once it grasps the concept that the purpose of political life should be shaping social relations, processes, and ends that enhance common goods and individual development and enrichment. The instrumental use of humans and nature; the exploitation and expropriation of people, communities, and the natural world; the extension of cultural forms of control, subordination, and exclusion; other forms of subordination and marginalization; or the elaboration of vapid forms of subjectivity—all must be countered with an alternative value system rooted in the concrete purposes of our social membership.

I must emphasize that this is an ontological premise—it derives its categories and concepts from the capacities that humans have and its evaluative concepts from how these capacities are shaped and (mis)directed by any given ontic form of social reality in historical time. An ontological approach to ethics, value, and judgment focuses on how structures of social relations and the norms and practices that instantiate them are organized and sees the shape of these structures as constitutive of individual and common life. It is distinct from formal or substantive approaches to ethics and politics in that it takes our relational lives with others as the basic substance of value, but it also sees these relations as pliable and as the result of practices governed by forms of power that can be transformed and remade once we become self-conscious of our capacity to orient the substantive content of our sociality toward common goods and social freedom. Value is thus to be seen as ontological in nature rather than formal or as an abstract principle—it is circumscribed by the practices and purposes of our social world. Values entail certain ways of living, practices, relations to others and self, and so on. Values are concrete, real. They are functions of practices and the relational structures and processes that the forms of our sociality take. Judgment denotes the ability of individuals to assess and rationally grasp how the objective social processes that surround them either enhance the common forms of sociality and self-development or frustrate or redirect these capacities toward particular ends and purposes. As Andrew Feenberg has pointed out: “Judgment dereifies what were formerly understood as absolutes and reveals them as processes of constitution of self and world. It follows techniques back to their origins, establishing the relation between ends and the life-world

from which they emerge. It brings reason and experience into critical contact."¹⁴

This "critical contact" that Feenberg references is precisely what has been severed in modern culture. Indeed, in 1929, in *The Quest for Certainty*, John Dewey remarked on what he deemed to be the fundamental problem of the modern age, echoing this very thesis. As he put it:

The problem of restoring integration and cooperation between man's beliefs about the world in which he lives and his beliefs about the values and purposes that should direct his conduct is the deepest problem of modern life. It is the problem of any philosophy that is not isolated from that life.¹⁵

As I see it, a critical social ontology can provide us with a means to reconnect values with action and ground our values in the concrete nature of our lives together as cooperative, interdependent beings. Judgment is central in this regard because it is the second-order capacity that enables social critique and social transformation. This is too important to leave to the "political" or any other academic abstraction. A new ethical and political philosophy must be rooted in a rational theory of human beings. Once this is achieved, politics can once again speak of having a vision for emancipatory transformation.

Political judgment is therefore entwined with the question of political obligation and of disobedience. The fundamental point toward which any question of political judgment must bring us is not necessarily a question of consensus and agreement, especially within the administrative-capitalist societies racked by inequality and power. Rather, critical judgment will lead us toward dissensus and disobedience to the imperatives, norms, and institutions of the cybernetic society. My argument is that the relation between obligation and disobedience, between consent and dissent are not opposed but dialectically related concepts. A rational stance of disobedience must be rooted in the kinds of social arrangements and norms that would warrant our obedience. John Dunn

14. Andrew Feenberg, *Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 131.

15. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1929), 255.

has suggested that any theory of political obligation also requires a theory of rationality and a theory of ethics. As he puts it: "The only way in which presumed moral obligations might be conclusively whipped in under the aegis of rational action is by constructing and vindicating a comprehensive theory of what, theoretically, ethically, factually etc., it is rational for men to believe."¹⁶

As I see it, this is an invitation to a more robust and ontologically grounded form of judgment. Once we see that our ethical lives should be shaped and judged according to how social beings can be morphed by the social and cultural structures that govern self-development can we begin to approach a theory of politics that is once again organized for the purpose of the development and freedom of its members. Domination, exploitation, instrumentality, and other forms of defective sociality can be called into question on objective grounds: that is, based on the foundation that the purposes and rational end of all legitimate sociopolitical associations, norms, institutions, and so on, are the common benefit of all and the development of each person as a social being, an individual who is socially and associationally constituted. But individuality is social and ensconced in social relations and social processes, and judgment must be able to have this as its ground if it is to serve a critical function. I believe this way of thinking can grant us a more critical and more robust way to think about practical reason and political life more generally. It is the burden of the following pages to make this case and show that a new more critically engaged alternative for political and ethical theory remains to be developed.

16. John Dunn, *Political Obligation in its Historical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 247.