

# Hans-Jürgen Krahl: Social Constitution and Class Struggle

Jordi Maiso

Hans-Jürgen Krahl (1943–70) has fallen into oblivion. If he is ever mentioned, it is usually as the rebellious student of Theodor W. Adorno who turned against his teacher during the student demonstrations of the late 1960s, and in so doing, revealed a supposed rupture between critical theory and emancipatory praxis. The tipping point of the conflict was the occupation of the Institut für Sozialforschung in January 1969, led by Krahl, which eventually caused Adorno to call the police.<sup>1</sup> It is said that Adorno asked for a can of spray paint during the occupation, as he also wanted to write graffiti that read: ‘This Krahl is inhabited by wolves’. This story fits the clichés that have become established since then about the ‘protest movement’ labelled as ‘1968’, as well as those related to Adorno’s alleged contradictions. However, strictly speaking, these commonplaces do not provide an accurate understanding of what was at stake in the frictions and affinities between some politicised students and the various generations of

lecturers in Frankfurt, who were, above all, their mentors.<sup>2</sup> These platitudes are even less helpful in understanding the figure of Krahl himself, who was undoubtedly the most prominent head of the student movement in Germany. His premature death in a car accident on the night of 13–14 February, 1970, at the age of 27, abruptly curtailed an intellectual career that had barely begun. ‘He is irreplaceable, and I am convinced that he would have been a remarkable person’, Max Horkheimer wrote to his parents after hearing the news of his death (Horkheimer, 1970). ‘He was the cleverest of us all’, Rudi Dutschke said at some point (quoted by Reinicke, 2013: 282).

Krahl was, along with Dutschke, the main figure of the anti-authoritarian movement in the Federal Republic of Germany. Both of them were decisive at the height of the protests between 1967 and 1969. But Krahl essentially stood out as the movement’s theoretician, constantly standing guard for theory against the anti-intellectualism and hostility

within his own ranks, while Dutschke emphasised political agitation (Claussen, 1985: 427; Reinicke, 2010). The brief life of the movement was marked by the tragic fate of both figures. Dutschke was shot on the Berlin Kurfürstendamm in April 1968, and he would die 11 years later as a consequence of his injuries. Krahl's sudden demise in February 1970 was a real blow. The protest movement was undergoing a seemingly unstoppable breakdown process into small sectarian groups. In fact, the main student association during the protest movement, the SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* [Socialist German Student Federation]), would informally dissolve immediately after Krahl's burial and officially a few weeks later. But it could be said that his demise sealed not only the breakdown of the student movement in West Germany but also the phase in which Frankfurt was the epicentre of critical social theory. Adorno had died of a sudden heart attack barely six months before, and his theoretical positions were not pursued further at the University of Frankfurt; Horkheimer had been retired in Montagnola for some time. Among the youngest, only Schmidt would stay in Frankfurt. Oskar Negt would soon move to Hanover in order to establish a new focus of critical social theory there; Jürgen Habermas, for his part, would leave for Starnberg to develop his theory of communicative action at the Max Planck Institute. His return to the University of Frankfurt in 1983 was the beginning of a different phase.

But who was Hans-Jürgen Krahl? Although he did not receive as much media attention as Dutschke, his intellectual and political potential was extraordinary. If Günter Grass came to refer to the student revolt as the 'well-read revolution' (Wesel, 2002: 39), given that its main members had a solid theoretical background, this was especially true for Krahl. There is no shortage of evidence of his extensive scholarship, which was not limited to the Marxian tradition, since he has also been shown to be familiar with the philosophical work of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche,

Plato and Aristotle, with literary Classicism and German Romanticism (Hölderlin, Jean Paul) and with authors such as G. Büchner, S. George and G. Benn.<sup>3</sup> Adorno described him as one of his most brilliant students, and he was perhaps the only one capable of holding his own not only with Habermas, Negt and Schmidt but also with Ralf Dahrendorf and Alexander Mitscherlich. However, Krahl barely published during his lifetime. The period of heightened politicisation and protests between 1967 and 1969 left no time for a conventional academic career. His doctoral thesis on the 'natural laws of capitalist development', supervised by Adorno, had been put on hold with the emergence of the protest movement. What has come to us from his work is irrevocably fragmented and bears witness to the fact that his thought was abruptly interrupted: he left mainly unfinished papers, texts and transcriptions of seminar presentations, teach-ins and other speeches, as well as some notes and reflections.

His main book, *Konstitution und Klassenkampf. Zur historischen Dialektik von bürgerlichen Emanzipation und proletarischer Revolution* [Social Constitution and Class Struggle. On the Historical Dialectic of Bourgeois Emancipation and Proletarian Revolution] (Krahl, 1971), edited by some of his comrades a year after his death, consists of 400 tightly written pages containing writings and presentations from 1966 to February 1970. As Detlev Claussen has pointed out (Maiso, 2009: 121), this volume brought together texts that were produced at a time when theoretical work was conceived as being part of a process of political intervention – a conception which arose in the midst of the student movement – and it cannot be evaluated according to the conventional criteria for a theoretical work. It was down to Krahl's friends and comrades that his mainly spoken or scrawled words would take the form of a printed book.<sup>4</sup> This should be borne in mind when reading these writings, as most of them were not intended to be fixed and exposed, or to be made available to readers

who today can barely guess what was at stake in each utterance. Hence, the book has remained largely an 'historical document' of a theoretical-political path that was inextricably linked to the anti-authoritarian movement and would disappear with it.

However, these writings may also offer something more. For they reveal Krahl's search for a theoretical and political position capable of living up to the demands of his time; he was aware that the tradition that had emerged from the labour movement was no longer useful, and that the priority of critical theory was to articulate the potential for social transformation available within advanced capitalism. Undoubtedly, Krahl's language and interests were marked by the anti-authoritarian movement from which they emerged, but his search remained and remains central to any living critical theory. The aim was to grasp social reality from the point of view of its transformation (Krahl, 1971: 248). Theory was to be once again a 'material force' in history. Krahl therefore embodied an understanding of critical theory that was completely alien to the academic drifts that have prevailed since his death, starting mainly in the 1970s. What constituted this understanding was mainly its partisanship, its rejection of 'pure' knowledge, as well as an eminently political drive. 'Krahl's death in 1970 symbolised the death of this political orientation in West Germany, something that could only be suspected at the time: the 1970s were marked by spontaneous, vertically structured parties and the RAF' (Claussen, 1985: 426). The historical understanding of the anti-authoritarian phase of the protest movement has been overshadowed by what followed: the dissolution of the movement into small sectarian groups of Maoist or Marxist-Leninist bent and into factions that opted for armed struggle. In German public discussion, the protest movement, sometimes including Krahl himself (Kalitz, 2007: 127 ff.), has been reduced to a mere 'antecedent' of the armed actions of the Red Army Faction or the 2 June Movement in the 1970s.

Together with Krahl's untimely death and his scattered and fragmented oeuvre, this is perhaps the greatest difficulty in understanding the relevance of his contributions and his political and intellectual physiognomy.

### THE FORGING OF 'ROBESPIERRE FROM BOCKENHEIM'

Krahl himself provided significant testimonies about his political and intellectual path. The main document in this regard is his famous 'Angaben zur Person' [Personal information], an improvised speech delivered at the trial of the demonstrators against the granting of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade to the Senegalese president, Léopold Senghor. In this speech Krahl showed off his abilities as an orator, and recounted how his 'odyssey through the forms of organisation of the ruling class' (Krahl, 1971: 20) had led him to the anti-authoritarian movement. When Krahl gave this speech, in October, 1969, he was barely 26 years old, and was already a public personality. This pale and fragile young man with a glass eye (he lost his right eye in a bombing when he was barely one year old) exhibited here a rhetorical style that was self-assured, precise and scathing. Barely two years earlier, in June 1967, the complicated Adornian-Hegelian jargon used in the speech he delivered in a protest over the murder of the student Benno Ohnesorg in Berlin emptied the campus (Claussen, 1985: 427). He had now become a brilliant orator and a figurehead for the movement, and had managed to gain the respect even of those who did not share his political positions (Schütte, 1970: 711). Given his talent as an agitator, the media would refer to him as the 'Robespierre from Bockenheim', alluding to the Frankfurt district where the university was based. For Krahl was not only the major figurehead of the movement: like Dutschke, he was right at the forefront, both in the teach-ins and

assemblies and in the confrontations with the police.

A sort of personal legend began to emerge around Krahl, which he himself would help to create.<sup>5</sup> Although he did not care much about his appearance and did not at first stand out among the stylised and subversive looks that prevailed in the movement, Krahl embodied an existential radicalism. The attempt to give birth to new forms of individuality after the historical decline of the bourgeois subject became a way of life for him. He had no fixed address and often no money either. He slept in friends' houses, shared flats or student lodgings, always accompanied by his bag filled with books and notes. He had no library, but he had read a lot and had a prodigious memory. He did not hide his homosexuality, and his stamina with alcohol was legendary (he drank quadruple shots of *Korn*). Despite coming from a humble family from Lower Saxony, which had allowed him to have a good education, he often alluded to a presumed aristocratic origin, and even mentioned the dynasty of the von Hardenbergs, which would make him nothing less than a descendant of Novalis (zur Lippe, 1989: 122; Rabehl, 1997: 42). These attempts to devise a character, however, were probably above all a kind of armour, an attempt to protect himself. He was an intelligent and sensitive young man who had quickly become a public figure and who, despite his many admirers and adepts, was rather lonely (Wesel, 2002: 130).

But Krahl knew that his personal path was also symptomatic, as it gave a voice to the politicising process of a young generation in post-Nazi Germany. In his 'Angaben zur Person', he shed light on the hidden side of the Adenauer restoration and the economic miracle in West Germany, which led this generation to grow in an atmosphere of tacit continuity with the national-socialist past:

In Lower Saxony, at least in the places where I come from, what can be called the ideology of the soil still dominates to a large extent, so in my political education process I could only move within a spectrum that ranged from the German Party to

the Guelph Party. I could not even access the ideologies of liberalism and parliamentarism. It must be borne in mind that in the villages where I grew up, meetings still retained that non-public sphere reminiscent of the rituals of witchcraft trials in the Middle Ages. (Krahl, 1971: 19)

His journey would lead him to pass through mystical and ultranationalist groups such as the Luddendorffbund, close to the ideology of blood and soil, until in 1961, when he was only 18 years old, he founded the youth section of the Christian Democrat Union (CDU) in his native town. It was through the church that he heard, for the first time, news of the resistance against Nazism. But even in his earliest years at university, in Göttingen, he frequented elitist student associations that practised fencing. Intellectually, he would first come into contact with Heidegger's philosophy ('a philosophy that was given to imperialist adventures': Krahl, 1971: 21), then with logical positivism, before finally discovering Marxist dialectics. What Krahl described here was an education process understood as a process of individual emancipation, a gradual break with the oppressive and authoritarian environment that prevailed in the German society where he grew up.

It is not surprising, therefore, that a young man on such a path might be attracted to the figure of Adorno, as he raised a solitary, non-conformist voice in the 'castrated' political environment of German restoration (Adorno, 2003: 18). Books such as *The Jargon of Authenticity* had been crucial in warning of the dangers of a new German ideology in which the echoes of the *Volksgemeinschaft* still reverberated (Krahl, 1971: 22). It was precisely Adorno's critical theory that led Krahl to move to the University of Frankfurt, a decision that he himself described as 'eminently political'. It would not take him long to become Adorno's doctoral student and to gather around him a group of politicised students with a strong interest in theoretical work. For this young generation of students, the need to understand the reality they

lived in was linked to the search for social transformations, and certainly what could be learned in the environment of the Institute of Social Research responded to these longings. Adorno and Horkheimer also represented a living connection with the critical tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, which had been buried by National Socialism and exile. But Frankfurt was not only the city for critical theory: it was also the seat of the federal leadership of the SDS, the association of socialist students that was to become the centre of the anti-authoritarian movement. The city of Frankfurt am Main was to be their main focus in West Germany, behind only West Berlin. Students who were considered to be disciples of Adorno and Horkheimer set the tone there, and Krahl was undoubtedly one of the most prominent among them if not the most prominent of them all.

Krahl had joined the association in 1965: 'In the SDS, I learned for the first time what solidarity meant, namely: building ways of relating to each other that allowed a detachment from the oppression and subjugation of the ruling class' (Krahl, 1971: 22). In this student association Krahl would find the culmination of the process of individual emancipation that he would narrate in his 'Angaben zur Person'. The collaborative work in discussion and reading groups, as well as the political activities at the university and outside it, enabled many young people to overcome their feelings of isolation and understand the political dimension of their individual life stories. It was a generation that grew up in the tacit concealment of the National Socialist past, was marked by the suffocating atmosphere of the Cold War and which in the 1960s would become aware of the terrible burden of unbroken German continuities and awake to world politics through national and decolonial struggles (Cuba, Algeria) as well as the horror of the Vietnam War. These experiences would lead Krahl's generation to confront the Cold War climate and institutions, which seemed outdated in their eyes.

The history of the SDS was to some extent an illustration of such conflicts. Until 1961 it had been the student organisation of the Social Democrat Party (SPD). But its support for campaigns against atomic weapons and insistence on recognising the existence of the GDR resulted in the SPD cutting off the SDS's funding and expelling its members. However, against all expectations, the SDS did not disappear. The political conjuncture of the 1960s allowed it to survive, and by the middle of the decade it had members who were not aligned with social democracy or communism and who considered 'actually existing socialism' to be an undesirable alternative. This was the origin of the new left and the anti-authoritarian movement, which, from June 1967, would become hugely significant in the Federal Republic. Its figureheads would be Dutschke and Krahl, who – from essentially minority positions – would manage to steer the course of the association away from the currents of orthodox Marxism closely related to the Communist Party.

The 'anti-authoritarian' label did not only refer to the movement's refusal to submit to the state, teachers or public opinion. It also involved a critique of traditional politics and authoritarian socialism, of the traditional system of education and of German continuity, and it was a symptom of an uneasiness about the traditional family and forms of intimacy (Claussen, 1988: 52). It was driven by subverting social norms and oppressive institutions which no longer seemed legitimate. In this way, the movement pointed to a new way of life, the kernel of which was to be anticipated in the very forms of political organisation: 'The *pathos* was to develop a concept of emancipation that would not appeal to pre-established norms in order to guide action' (Demirovic, 1989: 73). But the designation of the movement as 'anti-authoritarian' was also a nod to the influence of critical theorists who had carried out studies on 'authority and the family' and the 'authoritarian personality'. Some of their writings from

the 1930s and 1940s – chiefly *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Dawn and Decline* and ‘The Authoritarian State’ – circulated among students as pirated copies. They had discovered an implacable critique of both National Socialism and Soviet Communism that was directly linked to the political drives of the movement (Claussen, 2000: 155 ff.).

Krahl’s theoretical understanding was undoubtedly based on Adorno’s critical theory, although his texts also show the strong influence of Marcuse and the young Horkheimer. For Krahl, these theorists had provided critical categories that enabled an understanding of the logics of domination in advanced capitalism, which could no longer be interpreted from within the framework of pauperisation and material misery provided by traditional Marxism (Krahl, 1971: 292). Critical theory emphasised the indissoluble link between advanced capitalism’s forms of socialisation and the configuration of living subjects, who internalised the relations of domination at the expense of seeing their potential stunted and having their social relations reified in impoverished life. Individuals were reduced to being mere character-masks, incapable of acting autonomously or articulating the critical instances of the self, which the bourgeois family nurtured within its bosom. The capitalist system could develop a high degree of sophistication in its means to satisfy needs, but it reduced social life to the mere struggle for physical subsistence and ultimately brutalised human relations (Krahl, 1971: 25). What critical theory had recorded was precisely the historical significance of the collapse of bourgeois individuality, which was also to mark the rise of the protest movement:

In fact, its anti-authoritarian origin was a mourning for the death of the bourgeois individual, for the definitive loss of the ideology of the bourgeois public sphere and the domination-free communication, which arose from the solidarity which the bourgeois class had promised to humanity in its heroic period, for instance, in the French Revolution, and which it never successfully fulfilled, and which now has finally collapsed. (Krahl, 1971: 25)

Krahl shared with Horkheimer and Adorno the awareness that the end of bourgeois society had not only involved an emptying of democracy but also the end of a revolutionary horizon. His divergence from his mentors was that they had offered a clear diagnosis of the breakdown of the bourgeois subject but to a certain extent had been remained imprisoned in its ruins (Krahl, 1971: 291). Leaving these ruins behind required the articulation not only of forms of theoretical reflection but also of emancipatory praxis. The diagnosis of the defeat of the labour movement at the hands of Nazism and its integration into post-war capitalism seemed certain. However, the question then posed was ‘how is a transformation of social relations possible, ultimately under more difficult circumstances’ (Krahl, 1971: 242). When nothing in the logic of capitalism seemed to point beyond systemic immanence, Krahl asked how was it possible to move towards the realm of freedom. His position has been interpreted as a sort of immanent critique of the Frankfurt tradition (Spaulding and Boyle, 2014; Reinicke, 1973). But, strictly speaking, this transformative drive of critical theory was in perfect harmony with the tone that Horkheimer had set when he proposed the collective project. In his prologue to the long-awaited reprint of his writings from the 1930s, published in 1968, Horkheimer had written: ‘To extract from critical theory consequences for political action is something that those who take it seriously yearn for’ (Horkheimer, 1968: 14). The theoretical differences with his mentors would come from Krahl’s voluntarist approach, which emphasised the roles of spontaneity, consciousness and will in social transformation.<sup>6</sup> The conflict, however, resulted from the strategies to unify the movement in its decline, which would turn the ‘critical authorities’ into symbols to be capitalised on in the political struggle, as was also understood by Adorno (Adorno, 2000: 95). But to understand Krahl’s relationship to ‘classical’ critical theory requires

an analysis of the focus he attempted to give to the anti-authoritarian movement and how he sought to articulate in it the relationships between critical theory and transformative praxis.

### **POLITICISING CONSCIOUSNESS IN ADVANCED CAPITALISM**

The great coalition which united the CDU and the SPD at the end of 1966 under Chancellor Kiesinger and left the German government virtually unopposed in parliament gave rise to the growing student mobilisation for an 'extra-parliamentary opposition'. But the movement would not gain major impetus until June 1967. During a large demonstration against the visit of the Shah of Persia to West Berlin, the police brutally repressed the demonstration and allowed the Shah's guard to beat the students. A policeman shot an unarmed and peaceful student in the back and killed him. The Berlin government and the mainstream media closed ranks and defended the police action. The police officer who carried out the shooting would even be acquitted a few months later. This provoked general outrage and reinforced support for the extra-parliamentary opposition among intellectuals, students and the liberal press. Many students joined the SDS in the following weeks, to the extent that its organisational infrastructure could barely cope with the influx of new members. This new situation of political effervescence would be the framework within which Dutschke and Krahl, from the autumn of 1967, would turn the SDS into the centre of the anti-authoritarian revolt.

However, Krahl was aware that post-war capitalism posed a historically new situation for an opposition movement. The population was fully integrated into the system of labour and consumption, and after Nazism and the war, there was no politicised labour movement. Within capitalist societies, the economic struggle to gain access to livelihood

assets (wage claims and labour rights) had ended up being separated from the political struggle. This involved renouncing any transformation of social relationships in which survival is at stake:

The purely economic struggle integrates the masses into the relationships of economic domination and condemns them to apathy in the face of extra-economic violence. The suppression of categories of political perception, ignorance in the face of brutalisation in all spheres of social life, is something that this reformism has helped to produce. (Krahl, 1971: 161)

In this context, the organisational forms of traditional politics were no longer useful. However, the population continued to have expectations of peace, freedom and a full life that were incompatible with their integration into the system (Krahl, 1971: 248). This showed a potential for social politicisation the movement could try to connect with, which would become its aim. But this also required an understanding of the existing balances of power and their evolutionary tendencies.

The first step to elaborate the movement's positions was the celebrated *Organisationsreferat* [Paper on the organisation], which Dutschke and Krahl jointly authored for the SDS federal assembly in September 1967. The starting assumption was that the period of the economic miracle (with its high growth rates and a level of employment close to full employment) was over. The historical moment was interpreted as entering an economic crisis. In this context the alternative between emancipation and barbarism took an unprecedented shape. Krahl had already noted that the 'natural laws' of capitalist development did not lead by themselves to socialism but rather to 'relations of domination which may be adequate for the development of production forces, but of pure barbarism: an industrial fascism' (Krahl, 1971: 88). This seemed to be confirmed now under the form of a 'system of integral statism' (Dutschke and Krahl, 1980: 288). Under this system, capitalist

relations could be stabilised but only thanks to state intervention that reduced the role of the sphere of circulation and exchange and imposed a command economy. The influence of Horkheimer's 'authoritarian state' on this diagnosis was very clear: Horkheimer pointed to the establishment of an increasingly tight and centralised control of production, which would eliminate free competition and the model of the liberal market economy. What maintained the social order and made the accumulation of capital possible was an increase in state coercion, unfiltered by market mechanisms (Dutschke and Krahl, 1980: 288 ff.). The authoritarian state, rather than being a mere state form, referred to a phase of advanced capitalism that was a 'historically new constitution of the system of social totality' (Krahl, 1971: 222).

The appeal to Horkheimer's text to signal the risk of an authoritarian takeover was not gratuitous: the great coalition between the CDU and the SPD had left the Federal Republic unopposed in parliament, and in May 1968 the government was to issue Emergency Acts that would restrict democratic rights significantly. As the 1929 crisis had favoured the brutal fascist power structure, the thesis here was that this coercion had not disappeared from the economic-miracle society, but that it had been internalised by individuals. The direct violence of the fascist phase had been replaced by the guarantees of the social state and by new forms of manipulation, in the style of the cultural industry, which attached the consciousness of wage-earners to the conditions of capitalist life (Krahl, 1971: 351 ff.). The influence of the Springer publishing group was symptomatic of this. Domination no longer operated as external coercion but as the production of a conformism that delegated all satisfaction of needs to the social apparatus. This is why Krahl warned of an authoritarian element in the 'welfare state', since its guarantees of material security repressed the social articulation of needs that went beyond

survival within the given social framework. Improvements in living conditions were introduced at the cost of plunging the population into a system of apathy (Krahl, 1971: 239). In a society where the vast majority of the population could acquire television sets and refrigerators, and where many had access to 'cultural goods', 'exploitation means the complete, radical annihilation of the development of needs in the dimension of human consciousness. [Exploitation] means that human needs, despite their capacity for material satisfaction, are attached to the most elementary forms for fear that the State and capital might take away the minimum guarantees' (Krahl, 1971: 30). This also involved a transformation of the temporal horizon of existence, which undermined the continuity of life histories and evidenced a new level of impotence against concentrated social power: 'Today, instead of long-term hopes, desires, expectations and fears, we have sudden reactions, expectations of immediate gratification and sanctions, and very short-term forms of instinctive satisfaction' (Krahl, 1971: 322). This transformation of the forms of social consciousness should not be considered at the level of mere cultural critique – of 'superstructure', so to speak – but should be interpreted as a constitutive element of the social system of advanced capitalism.

Clear consequences were identified: 'If the structure of integral statism, with all its institutional mediations, constitutes a huge manipulative system, this leads to the suffering of the masses acquiring a new quality' (Dutschke and Krahl, 1980: 289 ff.). The population was still thrown into the struggle for material subsistence in a society whose technical capacities allowed much greater degrees of freedom. The internalisation of the forms of domination made it very difficult to self-organise interests, needs and desires, since the population perceived reality from within the schemes of the dominant society. The prevailing logic of social rationality promoted a passive life, one withdrawn



into the private sphere; and the importance of SDS laid precisely there. Its function was, above all, the politicisation of intelligence. The students' position gave them the opportunity to transcend the conformist horizon of the 'golden age of capitalism', because their task as intellectuals was the understanding of the ins and outs of society. Undoubtedly, this opportunity was based on a privileged social position. But the goal was not to abolish privileges but to try to expand them beyond the universities, giving rise to processes of political awareness that would allow new ways of intervention and collective learning in which waged labourers and students could participate together. It was emphatically about enabling new forms of political experience.

The first objective was to make visible the latent, abstract violence that pierced the forms of socialisation of advanced capitalism and shaped the very psyche of individuals, threatening to seize even their internal nature. The new forms of political action and agitation, which were conceived as a process of social awareness carried out by 'active minorities amid passive, suffering masses' (Dutschke and Krahl, 1980: 290), should be aimed at achieving this purpose. In other words, a 'guerrilla mentality' capable of revealing 'the system of repressive institutions' was demanded.<sup>7</sup> The methods for this were taken from the student struggle in Berkeley that had started in 1964; as was the case there, the university was seen as the 'social base' of the movement. The protest consisted of various forms of 'civil disobedience', from sit-ins to teach-ins, which forced the consensus of the liberal public sphere and often its rules of play. Provocation was not an end in itself but a strategy to initiate reflection processes that broke the pre-reflexive connivance with the social system. Dutschke and Krahl wanted to direct the new organisational strategy of the SDS – which for them could not be content with being a traditional political organisation but should demand a transformation of

daily life and the forms of political struggle – towards this end: 'the problem of organisation is raised today as the problem of revolutionary existence' (Dutschke and Krahl, 1980: 290).

The ultimate aim of Dutschke and Krahl was to test how a politicised *intelligentsia* could become a material force in history – how it could reach a broad stratum of the population and transform their way of understanding reality. Undoubtedly, the movement failed in his most emphatic ambitions. It was overwhelmed by its own evolution, and was too weak and precarious to deal with an increasingly branched and complex social and political situation (Claussen, 1988: 51 ff.). Its verbal radicalism also had an impact on this, as it contributed to generating its own conformism; Krahl was also a lucid and implacable critic of the movement in this sense (Krahl, 1971: 309–16). However, the student association became the epicentre of an extra-parliamentary opposition that would transform German society: 'A social democracy lives only thanks to the enlightened activity of the politically mature masses' (Krahl, 1971: 156). In this sense, with no means other than leaflet distribution, demonstrations and constant processes of collective discussion, the movement managed to raise awareness of the importance of an active defence of its own interests. The intention was to go beyond the sphere of leftist ghettos in the conditions of advanced capitalism, and they succeeded in politicising a broad section of society without falling into the mechanisms and patterns prescribed by institutionalised politics (Claussen, 1988: 24). But Krahl's theoretical and political drive was not limited to the defence of a radical democracy. His main interest was to analyse the objective conditions for an emancipatory social transformation within advanced capitalism. His writings are permeated by the need to go beyond the spectacular logic of protest with a view to articulating forms of organisation that would enable a transition towards the realm of freedom.

## CRITICAL THEORY AND EMANCIPATORY PRAXIS

The core element that runs through Krahl's reflections is the analysis of the conditions for the constitution of a political subject commensurate with the capitalism of his time (Reinicke, 1973: 6). The purpose is to test the ground in order to move from 'prehistory' to history. In this sense, the title 'Social Constitution and Class Struggle' points to the very core of his theoretical proposals. But his notion of 'class' should not be understood in the traditional sense. It is not a reference to the industrial proletariat or to a social group with a certain level of income. What Krahl means by 'proletariat' cannot be considered as a 'given' in the existing social order, but has a strong utopian dimension: it is something that is constituted from within the enlightened activity of the dispossessed and salaried, emancipating themselves from the forms of coercive organisation in the classic institutions of the labour movement (Claussen, 1985: 429). The question therefore was: how could this new subjectivity be constituted in Western European societies in the late 1960s? Krahl noted that there was no revolutionary theory that was commensurate with the conditions of advanced capitalism (Krahl, 1971: 256). He would direct much of his theoretical effort to this, starting with an analysis of the social constitution of the capitalism of his time.

A first step in this direction came from his interest in Marxian approaches. The work for his doctoral thesis, entitled 'On the Natural Laws of Capitalist Development in Marx's Theory', aspired to a current understanding of the dynamics of capitalism based on a new re-appropriation of the critique of political economy. His famous text 'On the Logic of the Essence of the Marxian Analysis of the Commodity' (Krahl, 1971: 31–83), based on a presentation at an Adorno seminar in 1966–7, was fundamental. In it he sought to track down the role of abstraction in Marx's

critique of political economy in relation to Hegel's *Wesenslogik*. It is an analysis focused on the social forms of capitalism, essentially concerning value, abstract labour, commodities and money.<sup>8</sup> These abstract economic categories were understood as the 'forms of being' and 'determinations of existence' of bourgeois society (Krahl, 1971: 32). They also revealed the objective forms of social domination. Without doubt, the central category is value, which constitutes 'the automatic and pseudo-natural [*naturwüchsig*] engine of capitalist development' (Krahl, 1971: 84). Value is therefore revealed to be the true subject of the social process. Its abstraction becomes a tangible force, since the material and concrete being of commodities increasingly conforms to the pure form of value. In this way, it appropriates the materiality of the world and converts use values and human needs into a mere allegory: 'it lets them die' (Krahl, 1971: 58). Faced with the totalitarian and destructive predominance of the abstraction of value, the emancipatory interest consisted in re-appropriating human capacities to give rise to history as a conscious process. But Krahl stressed: 'Understanding the fatal necessity of the law of value... is not yet freedom in act, but it provides a theoretical basis for its conditions of possibility' (Krahl, 1971: 56).

But the conditions for this possibility to materialise also need to be understood. The 'natural laws' of capitalist development, laid out in the critique of political economy, necessarily lead to recurring crises, but not to emancipation. Emancipation cannot be the result of a predetermined historical process, resulting from objective mechanisms or needs. Rather, it requires a conscious political intervention, capable of breaking with this 'natural necessity', because only in this way can it open access to the 'realm of freedom'. In this sense, in his later texts Krahl focuses on Marx's insufficient links between the objective forms of capitalist domination and a theory of emancipation (Krahl, 1971: 392–415). For emancipation, in order to put an

end to 'prehistory', must come from the conscious will of organised human beings, not from processes imposed on agents from outside. This was also applicable to the Marxian notion of 'class consciousness', which could not be understood as being purely objective (Krahl, 1971: 398 ff.). Ultimately, it was a question of purging the Marxian tradition of its mechanistic elements, of all objective determination that might constrain the spontaneity of a transformational political subjectivity. But merely affirming this subjectivity was not enough: its historical and social conditions of possibility also needed to be investigated.

Grasping capitalism from the perspective of its transformability [*Veränderlichkeit*] required going beyond the very immanence of the system to probe the conditions of possibility of a transformative subjectivity. Hence his defence of the concept of a 'concrete utopia' (Krahl, 1971: 350). His proposals are tentative, sketches left in a fragmentary state due to his early death. One of their key aspects is in the category of production, which is clearly fundamental in capitalist socialisation. Production encompasses both labour and its social organisation. But a purely economic interpretation would overlook its political potential, for labour is not only a 'misfortune that valorises capital' but also – at least potentially – 'a productive force of emancipation that denies capital' (Krahl, 1971: 396). In this sense, Krahl's approach can be read as a rejection of the Habermasian separation of labour and interaction, which ontologises social metabolism with nature and confines it to the realm of necessity. Labour, as an 'objective activity' [*gegenständliche Tätigkeit*], cannot be reduced to mere 'instrumental action' (Krahl, 1971: 401 ff.). The development of human abilities, and even the capacity for enjoyment, is also part of the productive forces. In this sense Krahl developed a concept of production with a strong emancipatory potential. Production is understood by him as the 'beginning of history'

and therefore as the end of 'natural history': 'Production is what enables human beings to develop an active relationship with nature and means that they are able to emancipate themselves from it' (Krahl, 1971: 393). It is linked to the development and emancipation of human needs, even beyond self-preservation, is what enables 'an autonomous life activity' and, as such, 'is inextricably linked to political spontaneity' (Krahl, 1971: 344).

But how does this potential materialise in advanced capitalism? When labour becomes subsumed under capital, production is socialised. In capitalism, the productive process itself, the social metabolism with nature, is socialised – albeit not consciously. But this makes the contradiction between socialisation and private appropriation increasingly apparent. In this sense Krahl detected a key process by which, with the growth of productivity, scientific and technical knowledge becomes a production factor. Intellectual labour, increasingly necessary in a productive process based on automation and on the growth of fixed capital, is subsumed under the demands of capital. This transforms the very character of social antagonisms (Krahl, 1971: 340). On the one hand, intellectual and scientific labour loses its special character and is subject to the same criteria that govern productive labour, becoming subordinate to the demands of capital profitability. On the other hand, this makes possible an alliance between manual and intellectual labourers.<sup>9</sup> This alliance would be inscribed within the relations of production of advanced capitalism, and it opened up new possibilities for Krahl. First, it meant that the 'class' to be politically articulated could no longer be identified with the industrial proletariat. Without including scientific intelligence, it was no longer possible to construct a class consciousness commensurate with the conditions of advanced capitalism (Krahl, 1971: 341). In his opinion, this meant that the 'movement of scientific intelligence' could now be expected to become a 'collective theorist of proletarian praxis' (Krahl, 1971: 351).

These formulations, and especially the text ‘Thesis on the General Relationship between Scientific Intelligence and Proletarian Class Consciousness’ (Krahl, 1971, 336–53), have had a considerable influence on the approaches of Italian post-operatism (Berardi, 2016; Negri, 1976). But perhaps it would be excessive to consider Krahl as a pioneer of the post-worker condition. It has already been highlighted that some of these formulations, closely linked to the crumbling phase of the student movement, were somewhat problematic (Cavazzini, 2010; Reinicke, 1973: 54). To a large extent these theses are marked by Krahl’s opposition to the ‘proletarian turn’ within the movement, which after some defeats and disappointments had led to the predominance of pseudo-working-class positions among students (Kocyba, 2010). Moreover, the later course of capitalism revealed that the emancipatory possibilities that Krahl had predicted were not realised: the incorporation of co-operation and human relationships into the productive process has not broken the realm of necessity, nor has the division between labour and thought really been overcome. However, this does not detract from his search for ways to disrupt the objective logic of socialisation and articulate new forms of political subjectivity. In this regard, the core aspect that runs through his proposals seems to be the question of organisation. His purpose was not so much to develop a strategy for taking political power as to constitute forms of life and struggle that anticipated a way towards emancipation within actual existing reality. Krahl’s merit lies in having noticed the centrality of this issue for all emancipatory theory, pointing to the need to go beyond the positions of ‘classic’ critical theory in this regard (Krahl, 1971: 292, 300).

For Krahl, the constitution of a transforming subjectivity amounts fundamentally to a question of organisation. In his view the objectivist character of Marx’s notions of class and class consciousness prevented him from adequately addressing this question (Krahl, 1971: 400). Leninism, for its

part, with its confidence in the vertical structure of the party, took for granted what had to be built: class and the organisation itself. Krahl believed that only through the praxis of struggle could a political subjectivity with transforming consciousness be articulated. His approach would therefore be linked to Walter Benjamin’s observation that organisation is the medium in which the reification of social relations is reflected, but also the only medium in which this could be overcome (Benjamin, 1930: 221). This is where the centrality of self-determination comes to the forefront, as opposed to the imperatives of the constituted logic of socialisation. The aim was to anticipate the realm of freedom in the struggles carried out in the midst of a world marked by coercion. This was undoubtedly the point at which the dissolution of bourgeois individuality was bound up with the utopian dimension of the movement. But the new subjectivity, which required spontaneity and solidarity, could not be considered as a given in capitalist conditions, as atomisation, strategic relationships and a conformist attitude prevailed in them. Giving rise to new ways of living also required discipline. It was a ‘concerted effort to overcome the de-individualised status of individuals’ (Berndt, 1988: 182). In Krahl’s words: ‘For us in the SDS the question arises as to how to build a form of organisation which, under conditions of coercion and violence, could generate individuals who were both autonomous and able to submit to struggle demands under conditions of coercion. This problem is completely unresolved’ (Krahl, 1971: 262).

Certainly, Krahl did not succeed in solving this problem, but he unequivocally noted its centrality. The question of organisation also had to do with attempts to go beyond the individual experience of impotence in advanced capitalism. It was a reality that had to be faced, because ‘everyone tries to escape this experience of impotence and the pressure of the social relations because it is something painful’ (Claussen, 1985: 429). This became apparent in the breakdown of the movement,

in its degeneration into sectarian and self-referential groups, whose radicalism was purely verbal and did not allow for the articulation of a significant social force. In his later writings, Krahl repeatedly pointed to the need to reflect on the contradictions of a movement of young intellectuals increasingly turned to actionism, acting from within an 'action-based, sectarian and blindly selfish' consciousness (Krahl, 1971: 311). But an emancipatory movement required the establishment of long-term solidarities and an understanding of the coercive framework involved in social logic. If Adorno had confronted students with the critique of pseudo-activity, Krahl's later texts revealed that he was aware that the movement's emancipatory reason had become self-destructive. For Maoist or neo-Stalinist groups, indoctrination in their respective worldviews became a substitute for praxis and ultimately prevented them from understanding the capitalist reality they lived in:

The closed canon of systematic theorems and a disciplined organisation are symptomatic of a substitute for strategy and for the need of security and bonding that blocks the development of revolutionary praxis and emancipatory needs of freedom; of revolutionary needs in a political struggle that demands results and is fraught with risks. (Krahl, 1971: 318)

In his later writings, Krahl repeatedly pointed out that the movement suffered from the lack of a political reality principle. This principle should take into account both power relations and the social forms of consciousness (Krahl, 1971: 284–90). Only on the basis of the reality principle could strategies and organisational imperatives be developed for survival in late capitalism. Undoubtedly, 'the anti-authoritarian revolt was dashed by this lack, not by external repression' (Claussen, 1985: 429). For Krahl, therefore, the priority was to connect with diffuse social needs in which an emancipatory impulse could be seeded. The integration of the working class into capitalism meant that the impulse for politicisation was no longer hunger and material misery.

This broke the certainties of the traditional revolutionary movements, but it opened up new possibilities: articulation of emancipatory interests that aimed beyond the mere sphere of survival, of the struggle for 'rough and material things' (Benjamin, 1997: 694); awareness of the mutilation of human opportunities at the centre of the socialising logic of advanced capitalism, as well as the administered reduction of opportunity and the mutilation of experience; evidence that the technical sophistication of society, its progress in the mastery of nature, had not been accompanied by a development of individual and social potential but rather by their brutal atrophy. Hence Krahl's insistence on formulating widespread emancipatory needs at the social level, even using precarious and insufficient categories. Otherwise, critical theory would succumb 'to the technification process of the sciences' (Krahl, 1971: 323).

The sudden death of Krahl cut short the potential for a model of critical theory that had barely emerged. 'The life of Krahl, who physically and psychically walked a steep and deadly path, bears witness to the existential seriousness with which an emancipatory reality principle was developed as a collective possibility of living hope for the individual' (Claussen, 1985: 429). What followed was a process of breakdown into sectarian fractions, armed struggle and the repressive brutality of the German state. It would be naive to think that Krahl could have stopped this historical drift, but he would certainly have been able to theoretically articulate the *movens* of defeat and seek new perspectives of emancipatory struggle in them. What remains of him are only a few writings, some transcripts of talks and annotations rescued from oblivion.<sup>10</sup> These are little more than fragments, and they contain the imprint of a life in turmoil, marked by the intensity of a movement that left little respite for theoretical work. Nevertheless, they make possible the recognition of an enormous theoretical and political potential that continues to offer stimuli that deserve to be pursued.

## Notes

- 1 For background on the occupation, cf. Negt, 1995: 177 ff. For an elaboration of the events by a participant who was close to Krahl, see Claussen, 1985: 230.
- 2 First and foremost were Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, intellectual authorities with whom they were constantly in contact. At a greater geographical distance but closer to the politicised students was Herbert Marcuse. An intermediate generation was composed of Jürgen Habermas, Oskar Negt and Alfred Schmidt (and to a lesser extent Karl-Heinz Haag), who were at that time young lecturers and assistants at the University of Frankfurt. An interesting testimony of Adorno's relationships with his students can be found in Claussen, 1988: 267–71.
- 3 In 1965, Heinz Ludwig Arnold commissioned him to co-ordinate an issue for the *text + kritik* journal about Jean Paul. The volume would be published in 1970 and would contain many of the authors and articles proposed by Krahl (Sassmanshausen, 2008: 432). Rolf Tiedemann, editor of the works of Benjamin and Adorno, told how, in 1968, during the controversies of the Congress of the German Sociological Society on 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?', in which Krahl took the lead, the young SDS leader introduced himself in one of the breaks and sat down with him to discuss Benjamin's concept of allegory (Tiedemann, 2011: 56).
- 4 This is also true of the rest of Krahl's edited texts. The book published as *Erfahrung des Bewusstseins* [Experience of Conscience] (Krahl, 1979) is the transcript of a recording of Krahl in a 1968 workgroup on the introduction to Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. *Vom Ende der abstrakten Arbeit* [On the End of Abstract Labour] (Krahl, 1984) contained different fragments of his work on Marx and the state of advanced capitalism. Other texts mainly contain transcripts of collective discussions about Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (Cerutti et al., 1971) and about the relationship between sensitivity and abstraction for a materialist epistemology (Brinkmann et al., 1978).
- 5 Among the biographical profiles of Krahl, those by Detlev Claussen (1985) and Uwe Wesel (2002: 127–34) are especially valuable. The notes of Sassmanshausen (2008) are also very useful but contain some inaccuracies. In contrast, Gerd Koenen's (2008) attempt to re-evaluate his trajectory from an unpublished private notebook that Krahl wrote at the age of 17, suggesting affinities with a kind of ultra-conservative mysticism, is unconvincing and highly suspicious.
- 6 In fact, the most pronounced theoretical differences would not be with Adorno or Horkheimer but with Habermas (Krahl, 1971: 248–260, 401 ff.).
- 7 The language used in the text has often led to misunderstandings: 'The "propaganda of shots" (Che) in the "Third World" should be supplemented with the "propaganda of action" in the metropolis, which historically makes urban guerrillas possible. An urban guerrilla fighter is the organiser of an irregularity understood as the destruction of the system of repressive institutions (Dutschke and Krahl, 1980: 290). But it would be wrong to see in this 'guerrilla mentality' an intellectual anticipation of the RAF: 'Not only because it is false in a strictly historical sense, but also because between this call in the autumn of 1967 and the praxis of the RAF in the 1970s, there was a clear qualitative difference. Dutschke and Krahl defined the urban guerrilla as an element of an awareness strategy. The importance of militancy came from its propaganda function, not the other way around. The meaning of irregular action would therefore not lie in the materially destructive force of violence, but in the specificity of abstract violence, in order to turn it into a sensitive certainty, something that, through action, can become an object of experience' (Kraushaar, 1987: 23).
- 8 Krahl's relationship with the 'new reading of Marx' undertaken by Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt has often been pointed out (Spaulding and Boyle, 2014; Kocyba, 2010). Undoubtedly there are points of convergence, and Backhaus himself has underlined his influence on Krahl's approach (Backhaus, 1997: 31, 216 ff.), but the priorities diverge. Krahl's interest does not focus on a thorough understanding of capitalism at a high level of abstraction but on an attempt to conceive it from the perspective of its transformability.
- 9 'By this I mean that, on the one hand, the adaptation of intellectual labour to the norms of capitalist labouring time hinders mediating thinking, which understands society as a whole. But, on the other hand, as scientific labour is subsumed under capital, the bourgeois cultural consciousness in the classical sense (to which the scientific intelligence of the bourgeois class subscribed, precisely in the realm of natural sciences and technical intelligence) becomes annihilated. This opens up the possibility, not the necessity, that scientific intelligence conceives and experiences the products of its scientific labour as the alien and non-mystified power of capital' (Krahl, 1971: 325).
- 10 Since 2005 several initiatives have been launched to rescue the memory of Krahl, ranging from a

file and an institute in his name to several webpages. A number of unpublished documents were also published in issues 3 and 4 of the *Digger Journal* (<http://www.digger-journal.net/>).

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