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**RETHINKING DIVERSITY IN ACADEMIC
INSTITUTIONS –
FOR A REPOLITICIZATION OF DIFFERENCE
AS A MATTER OF SOCIAL JUSTICE**

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Abstract

In recent years, the grammar of diversity led to neoliberal policy changes in German academia which distract from, as well as reinscribe, postcolonial power relations. What are the uses of diversity, and what is undone by the diversity paradigm? We offer a feminist postcolonial critique of some effects and pitfalls of diversity politics.

Rethinking Diversity in Academic Institutions

Over the past years, the grammar of diversity has entered the neoliberal university in Germany in an intensified way. This tendency becomes apparent in the proliferation of awareness trainings, statistical instruments, monitoring measures, as well as recruitment materials emphasizing diversity studies programs aiming to generate applicable policies. Taken together, these institutional developments circumscribe the rearticulations of a complex regulatory regime of difference and “equality” in the German context. In this article, we explore some dimensions of these rhetorical shifts as they apply

to higher education, and argue that they indicate a broader turn from assimilatory policies of erasure and exclusion to the selective incorporation of what we call “differential human capital,”¹ namely differences constructed as commodifiable assets for the individual, the institution, and aims and rationalities of the German state to carve out a niche for itself in the age of neoliberal diversity.

The diversity discourse promotes a staging of difference for the benefit of institutional public relations. At best, the university is given a new face. At the same time, we are witnessing a turn to diversity as a scholarly concern, so that Diversity Studies as a field could established itself as an “integrative approach in research” (Krell et al., 2007). It seems, however, that most publications coming out of this relatively new field in the German context are mainly oriented towards policy recommendations, and to the application and management of diversity (see e.g. Weißbach et al., 2009). But what about the actual practices of knowledge production and educational curricula? What about institutional discriminatory effects and hegemonic power relations within the university?

Given that the debate over diversity in the German context is a fairly new phenomenon and has replaced the rather short-lived focus on multiculturalism, we want to trace how the concept as such entered German-speaking academic settings, proceed to critique its dominant forms of reception, and discuss some of its pitfalls from a postcolonial-feminist perspective. Above all, we argue in favor of a repoliticization of difference as a matter of social justice and political action. In this way, we want to offer a contribution towards the long-term project of the abolition of colonial-racializing, gendering, and sexualizing

¹ We mobilize the theory of human capital in explicit reference to Michel Foucault’s critique of neo-liberalism as the recoding of all spheres of human life and behavior as susceptible to economic analysis so that human activity becomes always already economic activity, hence individual and collective humanity, human capital (see Foucault 2008). We conceive of the notion of “differential human capital” as a way to flag both, the differential valorization of skills, traits, and characteristics, as well as the valorization of difference itself as inherent in neoliberal diversification strategies for more efficient value extraction.

processes that reproduce forms of difference which we see as inextricably linked and interlocking. A relational matrix of power produces differently constituted, relational subject positions and subjectivities, engendering differentiated capabilities and attachments. We argue that the discourse of "diversity" objectifies relations of power and stabilizes them through neoliberal inclusion of figures of difference in ways that, as Angela Davis has argued, make no difference (Davis, 2008), while simultaneously perpetuating and stabilizing social injustices within the realms of higher education.

Between Neoliberal Educational Profitability and Equal Treatment Politics

With the move to internationalize production and services since (at least) the 1990s, the category "diversity" has circulated mainly as a managerial paradigm in the hope of remaining competitive in the international market place of higher education. This marketization of higher education in particular (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2015; Kauppinen, 2012; Massey, 2004) has fostered the incorporation of diversity policies that are at the center of the restructuring processes of the neoliberal university (Ahmed, 2012; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2015).

The commodification and regulation of "human resources" within education takes place against the backdrop of postcolonial migration, apprehended through discourses of diversity, increased mobility for some recognized as assets, while not for others, and neoliberal globalization.² Those others of diversity are tolerated as "guests," and "welcomed" into the university, at best, as auditors in gestures of postcolonial benevolence. The marketization of education and the workings of academic capitalism (Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004) both draw on the grammar and logic of diversity policies as part of a management agenda for profitability. At the same time, the rhetoric of diversity with its inclusive aspirations emphasizes

² Neoliberal globalization, for the purpose of this article, is defined as a contextual articulation of free market governmental practices in times of globalization with varied and often contradictory social and political rule (Sparke, 2006, Mountz et al., 2015).

the neoliberal appreciation of “variety,” advertises intercultural competency as an asset to business, and operates with the semantics of equal opportunity. Against this background of the ambivalence of neoliberal educational profitability and equal treatment politics, discussions on diversity within and beyond the university should be placed under critical scrutiny.

The idea of diversity management as such entered the German discourse on the initiative of business representatives drafting a so called “Charta of Diversity,” which inserted the German word for “variety” (*Vielfalt*) into the economic paradigm of diversification. As of now, this advance by market actors gained symbolic support from the European commission, but there is no outline for its implementation, which hence, as so often, depends solely on the good will of the signing parties. Very openly, this document states to seek for profitable ways to utilize “dimensions of diversity” to gain access to new markets. Those different “dimensions” are discussed as neatly compartmentalized forms of difference. The “dimension” sexual orientation is discussed no further than just in a short but poignant mention of “catchword pink marketing.”³ Not only is this an affirmative reference to the commercial exploitability of homonationalist processes of pinkwashing (Puar, 2007; Puar & Rai, 2002; SUSPECT, 2010), but also a blunt attempt to take money out of the pockets of GLB(T) clientele, imagined as mostly white and middle class citizens.

At the same time, the European Union put the bullet point “anti-discrimination” on the agenda of the German government, which led to the passing of the “General Equal Treatment Act” (AGG) in 2006. However, this step was the result of a lengthy process that endured several legislative periods as various drafts of the AGG were rejected and the European Union had to remind the German government several times of its responsibility to pass anti-discrimination laws (Lewicki, 2014). As legal scholar and critical race theorist Cengiz Barskanmaz argues (2008), the finalized legal

³ <http://www.charta-der-vielfalt.de/diversity/diversity-dimensionen/sexuelle-orientierung.html> (accessed in February 2016).

document prohibits all forms of racialization – that is, in principle. However, there cannot be any doubt about the fact that social and institutional reality is very far from a meaningful freedom from racialization. Further, anti-discrimination organizations have emphasized severe gaps in the institutionalization of the AGG. While policies and regulations across the member states of the European Union are more and more orchestrated and streamlined, the Republic of Germany has been admonished several times for its weak commitment to anti-racism, most recently in the reports of the European commission against racism and intolerance in Europe.⁴

The European Union as a supranational formation with the pretension of inclusiveness is mastering the language of diversity, as is already apparent in the choice of its leitmotif “United in Diversity,”⁵ albeit for some and not for the majority of others. The mythologized “founding moment” of a newly conceived German Republic, the so called “German reunification,” effectively remade Germany into a nation-state unified in homogeneity in addition to the administrative extension of the basic constitutional law of the Federal Republic of Germany to the territory of the former socialist German Democratic Republic. This conception effectively foreclosed the possibility of “diversity” for its subject population,⁶ and lent rationality to the increasing effort to fortify impermeable border zones through the state-sanctioned murderous practices of private security agency Frontex.

In the media staging of a spectacularized “refugee crisis,” really a crisis of European border regimes, over the past several years, the self-image of Germany as a tolerant, “welcoming” nation-state has been contrasted by frequent

⁴ <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/europaeische-union/fremdenfeindlichkeit-euoparat-ruegt-mildes-vorgehen-gegen-rassismus-12819670.html> (accessed in July 2015).

⁵ http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/symbols/motto/index_en.htm (accessed in February 2016).

⁶ The period of the early 1990s was characterized by racist pogroms which were “addressed” by deportations of the victims by the German government (see Ha, 2012).

right-wing attacks on encampments and asylums haphazardly and precariously housing those seeking refuge from civil war and economic devastation elsewhere. The reemergence of the term “xenophobia” in German media – coded as the “fear of strangers,” rather than racism – to explain increasingly hysterical and violent responses to both, asylum seekers and Germans of color, reinscribes the idea of all Germans as only white. The tendency to homogenize inwards and repel outwards is now aggravated in a German-led push to create an EU border fortification agency endowed with the sovereign authority to override particular nation-states unable or unwilling to fortify their borders against those seeking admission into the EU territory.

The German approach to difference can be described as a preference for homogenization and assimilation, understood as erasure or domestication. The short-lived turn to “multiculturalism” as a framework to come to terms with the presence and social contributions of racialized subjects in Germany – Germans of color, or self-identifying in other terms, such as people of color, post-migrants, “Kanacks,” “Ausländer,” etc. – may have been quickly discarded, but its core idea of “Fördern und Fordern” (roughly translating to “support and demand”) lives on under the long-term umbrella of “integration politics” as a recurrent concern of the German government. The trope of integration presupposes a preexisting, homogenous (white) German social body into which “foreigners” are expected to “integrate,” preferably by assimilating to the German “Leitkultur,” a neologism designating “German culture” as an organic, exemplary, and primary unit. In recent debates, assimilation seems to have become somewhat discredited, giving way to the idea of unconditional allegiance to the German constitution and mastery of the German language as prime indicators of “fitness” for presence and social participation in German society. Integration politics and the politics of diversity share a bureaucratic and governmental logic which further makes representation appear so desirable although it ultimately only strengthens the narrative of ownership that flows from the projection of nationalist discourses onto German citizenship

and the German constitution – “Volk” and “völkisch” in the racialist sense.

At the present moment, we observe a rhetorical shift towards managerial and humanitarian diversity schemes as a new hegemonic discourse in the German context. Homogeneity is now recoded as an alleged cultural allegiance to values of tolerance and equality as a backdrop against which difference is sought to be neutralized through individual intimidation, cooptation, incorporation, and commodification according to the promise of value extraction for institutions, and the German national project more broadly construed. Given the absence of a serious debate about social justice understood in the sense of political negotiation and contestation instead of harmonization of political conflicts, we posit that exclusionary dynamics are articulated through a corporate lens of incorporation. Accordingly, the economic strategy of “diversification” for value creation has expanded into the sphere of higher education. Diversity appears on the scene as a managerial discourse, which injects a certain “cosmopolitan” air of elite mobility and individual flexibility into an academic and white-collar sub-segment of integration politics – “diversifying” it, perhaps.

In debates about non-discrimination, equal treatment is understood, at best, as a form of compensation. More often, however, it is reduced to a notion of relief from unequal treatment for the individual, which misses layers of systemic and institutionalized exclusions within a relational field of power that renders attempts at equalization inconsequential. As long as anti-discrimination continues to be reduced to symbolic staging of inclusion that are effectively non-performative (Ahmed, 2012), institutional logics and discourses are not only left intact, but also shielded and withdrawn from further political negotiations so that racialization becomes revalorized as the profitable basis of diversity.

Diversity as a Tool for Non-Discriminatory Higher Education?

The so-called “excellence initiative” of the German federal state and states is a major vehicle for the insertion of the diversity discourse into the German system of higher education since 2005. This orchestrated reform program explicitly posits the “internationalization” of universities as a criterion for funding decisions, which means that “future viability” (“*Zukunftstauglichkeit*”) is understood as increased international competitiveness of Germany as a location for business and industry (“*Standort Deutschland*”).⁷ Thus, the question of the appeal of German knowledge production for the “global market of education” (“*weltweiter Bildungsmarkt*”) is foregrounded.

It becomes apparent that the German system of higher education is reformed to replicate the North American context as spelled out in the Bologna agreement (1999) which introduced a European three-year modularized Bachelor’s degree for the sake of creating EU-wide quality standards in higher education (see Alesi & Kehm, 2010; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2015), also by making funding decisions conditional on structural adjustments in the organization of knowledge production. Diversity as a “best practice solution” has thus traveled as an integral part of commodified university education.

In light of the colonial continuities undergirding globalization, the logic of development and progress is applied in differential ways. Previous notions of non-discrimination in the German university typically avoided the problem of institutionalized relations of inequality by placing the burden of compensation squarely on the shoulders of those affected by their consequences. The shift towards diversity further extends this logic by prescribing both, problem and solution. It should also be mentioned that the concept is in itself based on

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http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/programmes/excellence_initiative/institutional_strategies/index.html (accessed in February 2016).

constitutive exclusions, since only those who have already secured their residence title or German citizenship can hope to be recognized as viable human capital by neoliberal(izing) institutions, diversity practitioners, and the state. The discourse around diversity in higher education is overall determined by a force field between neoliberal exploitation and equal treatment policies, delineated by overlapping discursive formations of harmonization and cooptation that operate in marked opposition to critiques of power.

For this reason, we now turn to our assessment of the multi-layered effects of diversity politics in the context of the neoliberal university, and to our critique of the dangers of its expansion without further scrutiny. To be sure, concepts of diversity may vary across fields of signification, so that the following may not necessarily apply at all times. However, we see crucial pitfalls even with diversity approaches that consider multidimensional forms of subjugation. We also distance ourselves from hegemonic appropriations of intersectional analysis that may pay lip service but fail to politically attend to the inextricability of categories of power by celebrating essentialist identity politics or flattening power relations (Bilge, 2013; Erel et al., 2008). When postcolonial/neoliberal governmentality of diversity operates with “mix-and-stir” logic, intersectionality as a concept lends itself to hegemonic universalizations (Dhawan & Castro Varela, 2009). The staging or speaking of “variety” thus becomes a “happy point,” a polemic term coined by Sara Ahmed (2012, p. 14), to distract from the socio-economic context in which diversity is set to work to foreclose political practice.

Diversity as Distraction from and Reinscription of Postcolonial Relations of Power

The agenda of diversity in the new paradigmatic shift towards value extraction from equality discourses has been extensively critiqued by feminists of color in and outside the German context (Alexander, 2005; Davis, 1996; Eggers, 2011; Haritaworn, 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Puwar, 2004, to name just a few). Despite their differences, they commonly emphasize that

discourses of diversity foster a disarticulation of power relations that are distracted from in the very same moves that reproduce and stabilize them. In our reflections, we tie in with some already existing critiques to discuss the consequences of the boom of diversity (without difference) in German universities. We begin by interrogating the grammar of “variety” for its silences to show what the alleged “mainstreaming” of diversity obscures.

Diversity is not only imagined in reports and drafts, but is also part of representational regimes of legal ordering, calculation, and regulation. We argue that this circumscribes the problematics of *reification and appropriation* of difference. In her empirical work on diversity politics and practices at universities in the British context, Sara Ahmed describes how the representational “diversity mosaic” estranges racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects on all levels of the university (2012). Diversity, here, means the selective inclusion of the Other-ed in its commodity form – meaning, those produced, seen, and treated as “different” in the focal point of the gendered/gendering and sexualized/sexualizing gaze.

The turn to the topic of diversity mainstreaming in the to-be-diversified and reconfigured German academic industrial complex is structured along a similar dynamic which reifies hegemonic centers and leaves them intact in the process of standardization and display of purported variety. A necessary condition for diversity, in this sense, is an assumed neutral position from which the ones other-ed are seen as “diverse.” Maisha Eggers speaks in this context of the re-centering of hegemonic positions through the reification of “diversity creatures” (2011). With the resurrection of the German distinction between “guests” and “hosts,” German subjects with “migration background” become potential ambassadors of integration and diversity in order to prove their allegiance to “democratic” values, which, in turn, is always already in question.

A further effect of the workings of diversity can be sketched out as *exclusionary inclusion*, which fosters the

disarticulation of local critiques. Oftentimes we incorporate critical voices from primarily Anglophone contexts in ways that are selective and reductive. This effectively amounts to a form of avoidance to engage with interventions in the German context and thus obfuscates the ways in which historically specific relations of power persist while presumably covered (but really, covered up) by diversity. After all, why is it institutionally encouraged to invite scholars of color as experts on oppression and struggles elsewhere when it is still so difficult to stage critical interventions by local scholars of color addressing and theorizing the German context? While transnational dialogues and solidarity are crucially important, we also want to point out that there is a dynamic of *exclusionary inclusion* at work that is problematic because it furthers the *disarticulation of local critiques.*

The critical archives of resistance by people of color (racialized people in the German context) are hence disqualified as what Jin Haritaworn has termed “pre-theoretical raw material” (2012, p.16). This raw material then, at best, circulates through channels of transnational recycling processes traveling back in the form of Anglophone publications (Bilge, 2013; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010) and almost never makes it into German curricula where postcolonial, race critical theories, and non-Western knowledges are already placed at the margins, rendered further “empirical” material. To give an example, significant contributions by Black feminists and feminists of color to the debates about intersectionality in the German context in the 1980s continue to go ignored for the most part. Furthermore, queer and trans* Black people and people of color in Germany have articulated critiques of homonationalism and the multi-faceted forms of discrimination (“*Mehrfachdiskriminierung*”) that too easily fall away in the perpetual pointing to an “elsewhere” (see, for example, SUSPECT, 2010). These interventions push back against the hegemonic desire to do away with allegations of racism in the German context. Tightly interwoven with these ideas about diversity as internationalization is, furthermore, their marked *arbitrariness* (is everything diverse?). Eggers reminds us that:

When all forms of discrimination are simultaneously spoken about, it can happen quickly that all the speakers see themselves as equally discriminated against and lose sight of their own dominance with respect to other structural categories (Eggers, 2011, pp. 259-260).⁸

Moreover, the diversity discourse constructs and excludes those whose differences are seen as unassimilable to the molds of diversity – those are the “*Others of diversity*.” Hence, only exploitable (read, assimilable and reified) forms of difference are deemed adequate to the variables of variety as defined in the managerial diversity manuals. This expansion of market logic aims to harmonize potentially conflictual dissimilarities by analogizing them, adding them up in a string in order to ingest and incorporate them as “diversity.” Divergence is rendered a “harmless variation” in a move to replace political negotiations of historically sedimented relations of power through an empty pluralism (Mohanty, 2003, p.193).

A crucial element of this logic of a “diverse asset class”⁹ is the simultaneous exclusion of those others of diversity who are classified as unmarketable, costly, or even threatening – perceived as unskilled, uneducated, intolerant, sexually aggressive, potentially terrorist, or seeking asylum “solely” for economic reasons.¹⁰ Racism in all its variegated,

⁸ Translation ours.

⁹ http://www.charta-der-vielfalt.de/fileadmin/user_upload/beispieldateien/Bilddateien/Publikationen/FI%C3%BCchtlinge_in_den_Arbeitsmarkt_-_Charta_der_Vielfalt_2015.pdf (accessed in February 2016).

¹⁰ By means of the legal construct of “safe countries of origin,” EU and national immigration policies have created a tool to demarcate who is a “refugee” in need of protection, and who an “economic migrant” ineligible for asylum, first and foremost by narrowly interpreting what constitutes “persecution.” For a list of countries currently classified as “safe,” see: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2_eu_safe_countries_of_origin_de.pdf (accessed February 2016).

subtle, and less subtle manifestations is rarely understood as a matter of importance to the Bureaus dealing with issues of unequal treatment institutionalized at most German universities. International offices mostly engender and enable migration regulations instead of countering institutional racism that international students from the Global South are exposed to (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2015). In fact, in most German universities there are no institutional resources for students, faculty staff, administrative and service staff who are confronted with racist, queer- and/or trans*-phobic forms of violence. Instead, this everyday violence is construed as exceptional. The rhetoric of diversity is contributing to the silencing of these forms of institutionalized violence which operate within the neoliberal university. The structural connections and ordinariness of institutionalized racism, queer- and transphobia, economic exploitation of labor that is devalued in racist and sexist ways, the systematic dehumanization through racist police violence, racial profiling, state sanctioned racist murders, genocidal border regimes, practices of deportation as well as regimes of incarceration and patronizing care are simply bracketed as irrelevant to questions of diversity in the university.

Against this backdrop, merely a naming and orderly display of diversity is not sufficient. In the search for “instruments” to improve on diversity in order to compete internationally, or to attract and recruit “international talent” – understood through the prism of postcolonial migration regulations that stratify international students (and staff) alongside postcolonial North-South relations through visa restrictions, limitations on work hours while simultaneously having to prove a yearly income through a bank statement, and requirements to enroll in German classes (even if the study programs are in English) (see Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2015). Academic institutions are caught up in ineffective bureaucratic procedures that are only productive in the sense that they create neatly compartmentalized silos of difference that operate without reference to the broader informal, economic, and legal dynamics that produce them. This posits difference as essence rather than an effect of relations of domination and oppression

that mark people as “different” in ways that are experienced as violence. Based on this production of difference, subject and subjugated positions are ascribed. We should not forget that access to material and symbolic resources is already a complicating factor, even prior to any considerations of enrollment at the university (Nguyen, 2013). In focusing on individual privileges, scholars and some activists may risk ending up with a reductive critique of privilege that misses the point. As scholars embedded with and informed by activist practices and discourses, we have come to think of “privilege” not as something inherent, though it does shape subjectivity, create expectations towards a “good” future and happiness, and distribute intensities in socially produced space. These spaces of privilege take on the forms of some, making it harder for Others to enter and navigate this experience of densities. Privilege describes a condition that flows from cumulative processes of *privileging* with whiteness as its unmarked center.

In how far is it possible to bring about social justice as a meaningful, substantive transformation of these processes while neither erasing nor reifying difference? Are currently existing mechanisms of equal opportunity (“*Gleichstellung*”) and equal treatment (“*Gleichbehandlung*”) adequate to the task at hand of dissolving hegemonic centers? Diversity as individual inclusion instrumentalizes “variety” and erases the political need for anti-discrimination *to work*. Given this tendency, the diversity discourse runs the risk of leading to depoliticized identity politics (see e.g. Mohanty, 2003). For this reason, we argue that commodifying the idea of “identity” cannot in itself lead to meaningful social transformation, though it can serve as a heuristic means to address the effects of relations of production.

Towards a Repoliticization of Difference as a Matter of Social Justice

The exploitative administration of variety and the lip service to “diversity mainstreaming” is not only *not going far enough*, but all too easily misses the point. Too often we fail to problematize the ways in which practices of diversity

categorically exclude persons without residency permits. One of many instances in the resurrection of the difference between “guests” and “hosts” are, for example, new initiatives in light of the so called “refugee crisis” to allow refugees to audit lectures in German universities – not for credit, but as a charitable form of diversion. Variety as a cross-cutting theme might put the problem of discriminatory relations on the agenda. It remains questionable, however, if a discourse coming from neoliberal business management and the individualization of political struggles over social justice is really suited to pave the way for the kinds of social transformations that are undoubtedly necessary to effectively counter current forms of exclusion, exploitation, exoticization, cooptation, and dehumanization.

What would be possible alternative strategies to further a long-term dismantling of structurally anchored subjugation in German society in general and in its universities in particular? Instead of attempting to neutralize contentious issues and possible lines of conflict by means of administrative logic and managerial discourse, we argue that their complex interwovenness should be robustly historicized, contextualized, and problematized in order to confront them within a framework of sustained political negotiation at all levels of society. This is what we conceptualize as social justice, defined as a political process of contestation in continued political struggles over processes of deliberation and harmonization with their effects of concealed asymmetrical relations. This includes an uncompromising and critical assessment of the incorporation of modes of social justice within the workings of power in its neoliberal and professionalized versions. Political negotiation also has to entail a serious engagement with the critiques and perspectives of those who are produced as Others at the junctures of racializing, gendering, and sexualizing processes, refracted by socio-economic capital, without essentializing their experience as a static feature of their “identities.” It might even have to start with a close account of who it is that really emerges as *intelligibly other* in the first place to arrive at a form of postcolonial-feminist immanent

critique¹¹ and articulations of social justice that shed light on forms of investment in Otherness at the expense of forms of difference that (have to) fall away to make space on the stage of diversity in the name of recognition. We conclude that forms of critique are asked for that decenter and destabilize the individual and challenge national border regimes. This would mean to ask questions about systemic and institutionalized violence as effects of power relations and to put diversity discourses under closer scrutiny as neoliberal versions of the nexus between the human and capital.

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¹¹ We conceive of a feminist postcolonial modality of immanent critique as both a form of assessment and evaluation in the sense of the Frankfurt School as well as a critique of its immanent criteria.

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