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Critique and Category

On the restriction of political practice through recent theorems of intersectionality, interdependence and critical whiteness studies

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1. Critique

What does it mean to reflect critically on social conditions? What does criticizing actually mean in the first place? Questions such as these are rarely posed at the present time and answers are even rarer.[1] Even so, it is possible to see how change, transformation and the disappearance of particular modes of governing are made conceivable and promoted, on the basis of the current understanding of critique and from the way a critical attitude positions itself within a theoretical structure. So I propose for now a brief, provisional reply to the question on the possible meaning of critique: critique should not just be limited to judgement and negation. As far as political practices are concerned, critique may be seen as far more productive than a specific form of refusal, as withdrawal and escape together with a resultant capacity for action.

Contrary to what is for now a purely summary definition of critique, in the context of contemporary theoretical debates, it is often no longer done to specify more precisely what is currently meant by critique. Although the term "critical" functions as the clearly indispensable label of many progressive perspectivizations, its use is inflationary and meaningless; this type of "critique" offers nothing in terms of political power. The same is true of current German-language contributions to gender research, critical whiteness studies; it applies too to the debate about concepts of intersectionality and interdependence. Admittedly, the intersecting discourses articulate the ambition for a "social" project, which they wish to see as critique, but it lacks precision nonetheless. One can of course filter out an implicit interpretation of critique, but it is one that restricts the capacity for political action rather than enabling it.

2. Intersectionality and interdependence

Almost two decades ago, the constitutional law specialist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) first developed a concept of intersectionality. In the US, the idea she first formulated influenced different fields of research such as critical race studies or feminist legal theory and human rights debates (Walgenbach et al 2007:8). This theoretical conceptualization of such *topoi* as gender, race, class, sexuality as being condensed into "axes of power" or "categories", which have not gone unchallenged in the US, was only recently and very belatedly introduced into the German-language gender debates (Knapp 2005, Klinger/Knapp 2005). This theoretical import can be seen as a reaction to the constant objections to dominant gender research for not moving away from the perspective that favours social gender as the primary analytical category. Virtually resistent to any critique, the "main contradiction" of women's subjugation

was maintained, to the point of fetishism, in mainstream positions without any systematic problematization of the related reproductions of the relationships of power and domination.

That situation now seems to be changing, thanks not just to the increasingly audible debates about critical whiteness research (Eggers et al 2005, Tißberger et al 2006), but particularly with the more widely discussed ideas about intersectionality (Klinger et a 2007, Walgenbach et al 2007, Degele/Winker 2007). In German-speaking countries, the two research perspectives are inseparable, not least because some of the protagonists are participants in both debates. In the meantime, given its contentiousness, the concept of intersectionality is being amplified, broadened and transformed more and more around that of interdependence; it is nonetheless astonishing that the concept, already so controversial in the US, was imported uncritically at the beginning.

With the introduction of these "traveling theories" (Knapp), the four categories "class, gender, 'race'/ethnicity" (Klinger/Knapp 2005) are highlighted, which are actually only termed "trias" (ibid). In view of "serious changes in culture and society on a global scale" (Knapp et al 2007:7) and the "shaking of certainties", it is obvious that the various fields of knowledge with their "excessive specialization" (ibid: 9) are not in a position to investigate the very diverse and complex forms of social inequality. In order to develop an analytical socio-theoretical perspective, research orientations that have until now primarily been concerned with one of these central categories only should take account of intersectionality, i.e. the points where the trias overlap and cross (Klinger/Knapp 2005: 74 ff). While these efforts to broaden the focus in dominant gender research are very welcome, their staging of the current intensified conditions of inequality and shortage of tools for sociological analysis reveals an astonishing blindness as they enter

the scene. Instead of intervening in the longstanding debates[2] – in German too – and potentially developing new analytical tools through discussion, a trias adjusted not only for queer/feminist ideas is placed on the agenda. Sexuality for instance, only becoming capable of problematization as an experience in the 18th century (Foucault 1989: 10ff), clearly does not fit in with the idea of a *longue durée* that is intended, with the category-trias, to mark trans-historical, universal inequalities, inequalities that are specified in "modern, Western industrial societies" (Klinger/Knapp 2005: 73).

Gender as a valid analytical category has in the meantime been promoted as the "groundbreaking paradigm" (Hornscheidt 2007: 73), now rarely ever subjected to analysis, of German-language gender research.[3] The hegemonic perspective is characterized by categorial classification and arrangement, but there is no systematic analysis of the constitutive failure of these to grasp heterogeneous practices and experiences. With the broader focus of intersectionality, primacy no longer rests with gender but rather with categories – together with the misrecognition of failure. The concept of category-based intersectionality thus appears to be especially adaptable from a methodological point of view, and capable of being deployed in gender research.

Intersectionality is supposed to take account simultaneously of several categories or "axes of power" such as "race", class, gender, primarily at the points where the "axes" intersect or overlap. These constructions of axis categories must first of all be screened, separated and mapped beyond their supposed intersection by means of the intersectional sort perspective. In order to discern the complexity of the world, this type of perspective on three, four, five central axes or categories constructs and sorts not only these

categories but, at the same time, it asserts (implicitly) with this metaphor of intersection (Klinger/Knapp 2008) that the united, linear compressions have little more to do with each other, either before or after the point of intersection. [4]

In affirmative and critical examinations of this imported offer, as I said earlier, there is at last an attempt to broaden the analytical perspective as a newer, broader consensus of gender research. Racialization processes, economic conditions as well as mechanisms of sexualization should always be systematically analysed when social gender is in question. At the moment, the pluralization of categories presents one of the loudest answers to theoretical as well as social restrictions in mainstream German-language gender research.

In order to escape the limitations of the intersectional concept of "axes of difference" (Knapp/Wetterer 2003) or the more up-to-date "axes of inequality" (Klinger et al 2007),[5] a Berlin writers' collective (Walgenbach et al 2007) places the concept of *interdependence* on the agenda of academic gender debates.[6] The collective problematizes many weak points of the imported concept and develops perspectives on the simultaneity of several "axes of power" that go somewhat further. Obviously, in this book, they do not even refer to the longstanding disputes between "Afro-American theory and white feminism", for example, because: "isolated traditional lines of mobilization are always a symptom of depoliticization" (Dietze 2006: 224; see also Hornscheidt 2005, Walgenbach 2005); a "socio-critical perspective" is "not to be decoupled from its political genealogies" (Dietze et al 2007a: 12). It is only in such lines of flight that one can draw out an analysis of the inequalities of a neo-liberal exploitation of "diversity". Apart from the political demand, what is special about this intervention on the theoretical level is not simply that it uses another concept,

interdependence, a concept that is intended to analyse the *between (inter)* of the various categories as well, but one that must also presuppose or identify these categories beforehand. By comparison, dependence is meant to be understood as a dependence that is inherent in the categorizations, as it were. It is about seeing categories themselves as still bound up with, dependent on and determined by other categorizations, and to be assumed from the interdependent categories themselves, not from the intersections or dependences *between* categories (Walgenbach 2007: 61).[7] Gender as an interdependent category means "viewing it also as something that is still racialized, sexualized, localized" (Dietze et al 2007b: 108).

3. Naming practices

I will refer in the following discussion to these ideas (Hornscheidt 2007, Dietze et al 2007b) – in my view the most advanced – on the conceptualization of intersectionality / interdependence in order to make clear, with and in them, the limitations of this categorial thinking in respect of their understanding of critique. My focus is aimed at the possibilities for political action that this kind of critique offers, in accordance with the authors' intention. They see their "book project as an intervention in current debates on intersectionality, particularly in relation to the consequences for political action, as well as in terms of a critically considered use of language" (Dietze et al 2007: 7). The ideas of Antje Hornscheidt and Gabriele Dietze, Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Beatrice Michaelis are also suitable because they formulate either the impossibility of withdrawing from or refusing categorial models of classification or the desire to do so. A particular significance must therefore be attached to the understanding of critique and self-critique, as well

as to the relationship between questioning categorizations and refusing them.

From Hornscheidt's linguistically deconstructive perspective, the most important (self-) problematizations of an approach that attempts to grasp the inherent interdependencies of categories lie in analysing the bases for categorizations and not simply in establishing categories (Hornscheidt 2007: 72). Taking linguistic processes of constructing categories such as gender as a starting point, the goal of critical reflection is to arrive at "more complex concepts of categorizations" (ibid: 83). Gender may then be interpreted in this framework as "a system of categorization created in and through discourses only, which is for the most part binarily structured" (ibid: 75). In view of its naturalizing and hierarchizing effects – of its materialization, then – this "system of categorization" must be investigated; furthermore, the "linking, connection and interweaving" (ibid: 73) with other categories such as class, "race", sexuality must be taken into account. However, this interweaving is not conceptualized in the same way as the intersectional model of intersection between self-contained categories – the metaphor of linking and interweaving already suggests a more complex perspective that nonetheless carries on working with categorial threads; it is designed rather as a mutually constitutive interdependence and as something inherent in the gender "category system". Among other things, Hornscheidt investigates how people are organized into different categories through forms of naming, and thus how categories impose a hierarchical order (ibid: 77). In this perspective, categorizations are conceptualized not just as linguistic constructions with materializing effects that extend as far as structural discrimination. Categories are at the same time a "structuring factor of knowledge" (ibid: 73).

As a possibility for resistive action, Hornscheidt proposes "naming practices" that do not reproduce the inherent-interdependent understanding of categories, but implement and "in the longer term could lead to a naturally interdependent perception of gender" (ibid: 104). In these new defining practices, "gender" is intended to be simultaneously and coherently named with other categories, and furthermore to be linked orthographically through underscores[8] – as is the case with Hornscheidt's preferred designation of authors, to whom she refers in her writings: for example, the "white_western European_sociologist Pierre Bourdieu" (ibid : 72).[9] Hornscheidt consciously uses these categorizations since she herself refers to the re/productions of attributions and classifications intrinsically bound up with them. The offensive naming of what usually remains unnamed – since it is seen as the default – should bring home the mechanisms of knowledge production that have become self-evident. This interpretation, operating with the shift in naming practices, includes not just the marking of referenced authors as "Western" and "white" but naturally the marking of one's own standpoint *(Sprechposition)* as well. Hornscheidt sees these kinds of coherent naming constructions as an entirely political practice, albeit one that *cannot escape* categorization and with it a potential naturalization too. "Each categorization in itself has a fixing, restrictive and exclusive character per se" (ibid: 100). It would be "illusory and idealistic" to deny this fact (ibid: 83).

The problem with this approach is that there is no questioning of categorizations as the basic analytical perspective and a renewed, inflexible, uncontradicting definition, usually along binary structuring lines, is simply accepted. Through multiple, coherent classification of what is normally unnamed, naming practices are shifted and changed ultimately to reinforce their establishment as

an irreducible foil. Categories seem to be our prison, our indissoluble forced relationship.

In this deconstructivist interpretation of categorial processes of constituting, withdrawing from categorizations and refusing them is inconceivable.[10] It is not possible to leave the paradigm, alternative modes of thinking still fall back on categorizations, reproducing the very thing they criticize. There is no unsuccessful or missed point outside, no failed point beyond categories. Of course, any thinking or any academic but equally political analysis hardly seems possible without categorizing, ordering and classifying. But the idea of a permanent re/production of categorial structures through critical-reflective deconstruction sets these permanently and, in the end, refers to reforming dynamics of bourgeois capitalist societies alone. In this aporia, the end of inequality remains a broken promise. “Critique is limited to dissolving again what tends towards naturalization, towards reification” (Demirovic 2008: 36) and thus, in the permanence of this reflexive movement, is itself limited to becoming normalized and naturalized.

It makes a difference whether the dominant assertion that life is not liveable beyond specific structures is repeated, or whether the struggles against the maintenance of structures are themselves fiercely pursued.[11] That means refusing and withdrawing from the boundaries of order, which must always be maintained by constituting disorder, and thus setting boundaries oneself. Thus disorder cannot be understood independently of order, but rather as an assemblage that is not screened to the same extent; an assemblage that escapes order and that, at the same time, seeks to permanently legitimize this order through its persistently attempted categorization, screening and control.

Interestingly enough, almost all intersectional approaches get by without analysing power as manifold and not just binarily structured conditions, with which the productivity of power relationships, rather than their exclusive regulating, preventative and system-stabilizing function, might be problematized. To restrict the relationship of power and resistence to a reproductive relationship falls considerably short of the mark, for it is in and through power relationships that the possibilities for resistiveness are simultaneously generated; it is also why they may be considered productive (cf Foucault 1983: 113ff). Instead of being seen as a stabilizing reformulation of existing conditions, this productivity can be interpreted as a dynamic in relation to which the escape from categorizations can be systematically conceptualized. Persisting in the categorial paradigm that has a theoretically circular effect and sees changing political practices as merely reproductive is, according to my thesis, the result of a reduced, implicit understanding of critique.

4. Judging

The meaning of critique as “differentiating”, “separating”, “judging” and “accusing” has come down from classical Greek tradition, with a judicial connotation of criticism, therefore, which forces one to adopt the position of judge or party. By this ancient interpretation, a critical judgement demands discernment and the competence to judge (Röttgers 1982: 652).

Several centuries later, Kant no longer defines the critical method as one that openly discerns and judges, but as one that suspends judgement. With his understanding of critique, however, Kant too continues with the judicial logic and comes back to judgement. As Foucault criticises in his lecture “What is critique?”, Kant restricts

critique to a problem of knowledge (Foucault 1992: 29). Kant's primary interest is the mechanisms by which historical forms of knowledge are legitimated, whereby the critical enterprise is confined to knowledge about knowledge. Such a critique of knowledge is separated from political practice, limited to the production of knowledge only. In the Kantian understanding, critique marks the boundaries of knowledge at the same time. But rather than "crossing" them as "practical" critique (Foucault 2005: 702ff), critique in Kant's work stays at the point of stating and reproducing these boundaries. An understanding of critique as practice, on the other hand, should not control these Kantian restrictions to the critique of knowledge, thereby preventing critique from becoming political practice (Röttgers 1982: 662 ff., Raunig 2008).

Gender research that is reduced to the analysis and problematization of categories remains trapped by this limited concept of critique. Avowed "socio-critical" claims do no more than mark (if even that) the boundaries of categorizations, the conditions by which they are constituted. Fundamental infiltration and refusal of categorial structuring and normalizing thought, together with related fantasies of control, are absent. At the same time, intersectional categorizations represent a dominance gesture that claims an overview and sovereignty over unclear and complex terrain, which can be defined, established and screened as a binarily structured, traditionally white and Western perspectivization. The old judicial concept of judgement is intrinsically bound up with this gestus of intersectional categorization, and along with it comes the precondition for the depoliticization process that separates reflection and action from each other. In order to become political practice, critique, as the critical stance of epistemological or textual criticism too, must abandon and put an end to the logic of judging,

assessing and condemning so that it is able to join with social struggles (cf Raunig 2008). By comparison, the ordinary academic understanding of critical reflection very often controls the position of judicial judgement, and almost stops us from understanding social change as political struggles that require us not only to suspend judgement, but to refuse it and withdraw from it.

Against this background, the self-critique frequently and strongly called for in the context of critical whiteness studies and intersectionality/interdependence offers no way out of the judicial judgement-thinking *(Urteilsdenken)*. The self-positioning demanded of authors (for the most part white themselves) is (mis)understood as "situated knowledge" (Haraway).[12] This reductionist concept of situating and self-positioning occurs in the attribution, by oneself or by others, of "white", "woman", "Western" or academic staff member (cf, amongst other things, Eggers 2005). In this way, the privileged standpoint *(Sprechposition)*, which is not usually perceptible, is meant to be identified in a sensible manner. However, as already stated, such practice cannot escape the positioning of a hegemonic standpoint as a (self-) critique of identitarian attributions, and it reproduces permanently binary categorizations. This circular argument repeats the judicial logic of critique since it does not come out of the self-judgement/-assessment/-condemnation loop. The position of the judge is not abandoned, a position that corresponds to the idea of a sovereign acting subject that, through ordering, classification and judgement, is unshakeable in its authority. But, ultimately, the position of such a judge also means, precisely, a position that reduces – if not removes – the possibility of political intervention. Self-judgement simultaneously refers to a judicial discourse of guilt-removal and protection, to a judicial immunity (Lorey 2007),

in which condemnation produces a purifying difference (cf Butler 2001: 598), not only from others, but also from oneself.

5. Categorization and refusal

Gabriele Dietze, Elahe Haschemi Yekani und Beatrice Michaelis conceptualize a way out of the re/production of categories when they aim to productively combine various approaches to intersectionality with queer theory (Dietze et al 2007b: 108). They consider the strategy of disidentification to be a "radical refusal" (ibid: 118) of identitarian and binary categorizations. As an example, they cite drag performances of *Queers of Color* such as that by Vaginal Davis, which resist subjugating and normalizing discourses, and escape normative categorizations.[13] What is important for our particular context is that an *escape* is conceptualized and discerned; it should not, however, be seen as a complete separation but as a form of *immanent withdrawal* (Lorey 2008).

But Dietze, Haschemi Yekani and Michaelis also limit themselves. Disidentification, or refusal, is indeed "desirable", but "dealing with categories is something that can (...) not be relinquished": "The fact that intersectionality does not achieve totally satisfying results is not, in our view, a reason to abandon the concept". (Dietze et al 2007b: 138). Following Gayatri Spivak, they argue for a "strategic categorialism". This kind of action is intended to thematize the current constitutive outside of categories and to refer to the "intersectional co-presence" that risks being lost in disambiguating "forms of subjectivation". The authors end with an appeal to pursue critical queer research and activism again (ibid: 139) but, by holding on to intersectional "categorialism", they cut off the

possibility of systematically conceptualizing a critique that *escapes* and *withdraws*.

6. Critique as political practice: suspending – withdrawing – constituting

For Foucault (1992), critique is a practice: it is not a judgement nor a temporarily suspended one that will come back again and re/produce judgement. Abandoning judgement is not a form of distancing that only serves to screen and structure once again. Rather, it allows a new practice to emerge on the strength of this suspension (Butler 2002: 250). This abandonment withdraws from the structuring assessment, because it is aimed at the practices that escape judgement, law and category. People talk not about a point beyond power but about practices that cannot be recorded in a judicial conceptual framework. The new practices that refuse order and are popularly regarded as disorder initiate a recomposition, a constitution (Lorey 2008).[14] This does not mean the hanging together of categories, but the constitution that emerges and results from non-standardized heterogeneous practices, from practices that dare to invent something new. When critique is not seen as judging and holding onto the fetishization of categories, the practice by which order is suspended can establish the capacity of a constitutive power, becoming a new constitutive practice as a result. In this view of critique, it is about discerning the potency of what is considered unclassifiable, unattributable, i.e. of being open to practices that have no models and that slip, so to speak, through the screen, to practices that have the courage to refuse.

Foucault calls the practice of refusal and withdrawal "desubjugation" (Foucault 1992: 15). Critique is therefore an act, a "thoughtful disobedience" (ibid), a practice that does not fit back

into thinking in categories. It is a mode of thinking *(Denkpraxis)* that sees the questioning of categories not as a reformulation of categories, but as the constituting of a capacity to regard the disappearance of specific categorizations as possible, and to make it possible. The work to make power relations more dynamic and to change them is neither an individual act nor the act of individuals; it is not identitarian self-critique in the sense mentioned above. The duplicating, transformation and the rejection of power relations, the refusal to be governed in this or that way (Foucault 1992), are subjective as well as collective practices of withdrawal. Critique is therefore not integrated, but rather always tied to the specific ways by which one is governed, always in relation to the conditions from which it withdraws. It can never exist, autonomously or universally, beyond them. Critique "only exists in relation to something other than itself" (Butler 2002: 252).

Critique as practice therefore calls into question the constitutional processes of categorization and, in the practice of withdrawal, helps things towards articulation and perceptibility, "from which they are otherwise cut off by the prevailing language" (ibid). Critique makes possible what is unthought in a paradigm. In this sense, practical critique never means epistemological and textual criticism only, but its "concatenation" with the "social machines of resistance" (Raunig 2008).[15]

A critical perspective on concepts of intersectionality and interdependence should therefore not control the limits of the prevailing categorial order, return to the structures of the existing forms of governing and maintain the paradigm of categorization. On the other hand, it is precisely by rejecting the legitimation of screening and by refusing the categorial appeal that practical critique sets limits on categorial thought. Without judgement, it is about delegitimizing a specific structuring power to facilitate the

will no longer to be governed like that. This "will" corresponds to an "individual experience" as well as to a collective practice (Foucault 1992: 54). The capacity for a resistive constitutive power resulting from this will is what is meant by the political practice of critique.

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[1] Apart from this book, I should cite some exceptions: the conference "The Art of Critique", organized by the Viennese Institute eipcp in May 2008 (abridged versions of the papers are available at http://eipcp.net/transversal/0808), and Martin Saar's book (2007).

[2]Cornelia Klinger and Gudrun Axeli-Knapp intervene primarily in the sociological field of structural analysis and ignore a large

body of research on racism, queer theory, critical whiteness studies and also the many theoretical and literary interventions of Black women since the 1980s. Also, no consideration whatsoever is given to the current, highly virulent "religion category" (see in contrast Dietze 2006).

[3] Back in 2001, in the feminist newspaper *Die Philosophin*, which has since ceased publication, Astrid Deuber-Mankowski discusses the impossibility of linking 'gender' and 'category', precisely because misrecognition is a constitutive component of a gender category. (Deuber-Mankowski 2001: 11 ff).

[4] The feminist activists in the group, Precarias a la deriva, developed a very different axis model. In order to understand the process of precarization, they decided on seven "axes": mobility, limits, bodies, relationships and knowledge, enterprise logic, income and conflict (Precarias a la deriva 2007: 94, 2004).

[5] In this volume, Sabine Hark (2007) is the only one to question categorizations.

[6] In 2001, Gabriele Dietze already employed the concept of interdependence in an article (Dietze 2001).

[7] The concept of interdependent categories is intended to be explicitly critical of identity (Walgenbach 2007). The significance the prefix *inter* is supposed to go on having in an inherent understanding remains unresolved.

[8] The underscore signals breaks and gaps in gender concepts that are thought of as unambiguous, thereby rattling unambiguous perceptions." (Hornscheidt 2007: 104). The idea of the underscore can be traced back to Steffen Kitty Herrmann (2005).

[9] Hornscheidt only uses this designation for academics who, from a western perspective, are accepted as normal and always remain unmarked.

[10] No voluntarist, sovereign subject comes through the back door here. It is about potentialities of political action, which specific modes of thought exclude from all consideration.

[11] In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Butler formulates – in contrast with her previous books – a political perspective on those practices she has primarily theorized before as not liveable in a heteronormative structure. She now considers "the right or entitlement to a livable life when no such prior authorization exists" (Butler 2004: 224). However, Butler rightly emphasizes the violence inherent in the fact of denying membership of set structures. Following Butler and Foucault, Antke Engel stresses the political power of modes of existence that renounce a normative authorization (Engel 2007) and withdraw from it. In this way, she suggests, new subjectivities can emerge "not through a creative act but out of a critical relation-to-self" (ibid: 283).

[12] Further related discourses are the feminist standpoint theories of the 1980s and 1990s.

[13] When, for example, Vaginal Davis performs on stage, not as a "glamorous Queen of Color or a white diva, but as a white, racist, redneck male" (Dietze et al 2007: 133). For me, this is not about *assessing* a kind of disidentifying practice and its effects. Rather, what matters here is that the authors use the example of the drag artist to articulate a refusal of categorizations.

[14] Constituting is understood here, in the Latin meaning of *con-stituo,* as 'establishing together'. On the assemblages of suspension and recomposition, see Raunig (2008).

[15] ‘Theory’ and ‘practice’ are not to be separated in the critical stance and tend to become indistinguishable.