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The Habitus of the Critical

On the Limits of Reflexive Practice

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Critique is one of the fundamental requirements of artistic, academic and pop-cultural articulations today. A mainstream of the critical ranges from the requirement profiles for masters courses to Michael Moore and Herbert Grönemeyer all the way to most of the Documenta artists. The question therefore arises as to whether critical and reflexive practices have to be read merely as field-specific positioning allowing one to distinguish oneself from others as cleverly as possible, or whether criteria can be distinguished in terms of which forms of critique address the order of the fields themselves and the hegemonic order of the field of power. Various theoretical conceptions about the position of the critical can serve as a starting point for this kind of distinction. On the one hand there is the ideology-critical claim of critique that it takes a kind of "archimedian" position, from which point it attempts to dislodge the world, and on the other hand there is the accusation that critique is only a necessary vent within the processes of functional systemic differentiation, an argument – brought forth by Niklas Luhmann in the 1980s – that criticizes specifically the ideology-

critical variation for fundamentally mistaking its position. My question is whether an understanding of critique can be developed beyond these strictly oppositional positions, which reflects not only on the blind spots of these two forms of argumentation, but also on the cultural formations of critique, yet without doing away with itself as critique. At the same time, I also want to question the extent, to which Pierre Bourdieu's work is be situated within this constellation, and which impulses may be derived from this for my aim of considering critique as a special form of cultural articulation in the field of tension between theory and practice.

An Impossible Position

Pierre Bourdieu's critical endeavor is itself undoubtedly a historical one, i.e. it is linked to certain conditions and did not simply evolve, but was changed and developed through constant adaptation work. A model of ideology critique was dominant in the 1970s, in which practical effects were supposed to emerge directly from theoretical insight. When Bourdieu seeks to dispel the "illusions of the people", to tear down the "sacral barriers" of the institutions, to generally scandalize both moral and aesthetic distinction gains, then the counter-images are already available, such as what is "easy-going" about pop culture in comparison with what is "impudent" about high culture. Differentiations like these cannot be made without idealizations and theoretical blurring, such as when aesthetics and distinction can hardly be differentiated. At the same time, the practical claim of theory is articulated wholly without interruption, specifically linking "the most sophisticated taste for the most sublime objects with the elementary tastes of tongue and palate again".[1] Most of all, this relationship between theory and practice changed over time. The more he avowed political activism in light of the conservative turn of the European

social democracies in the 1980s and the 1990s, which appeared to him to be a meaningful option beyond his reputation as a social researcher and political thinker, which had meanwhile grown beyond small specialist circles, the stronger his theoretical emphasis became on the autonomy of the positions that were a matter of dispute in various social fields. Theory and practice thus appear to drift apart somewhat, are no longer directly intertwined as a theoretical postulate. Actual practice relies on the independence that only autonomy can guarantee. At the same time, the theoretical problem became increasingly acute between a social theory that only conceded a very narrow scope to its actors and a practice seeking to expand exactly this scope. Here it becomes important to distinguish between the many actors, who only unconsciously reproduce habitual directives and thus establish their "scholastic", moral and aesthetic standards as distinction gains, and the few who assume what is actually an "impossible position"[2] in the field and are therefore capable of addressing and using autonomy as a social form, those "authors of great symbolic revolutions", such as Flaubert and Baudelaire, who were able to found a new field, the literary field, specifically in their emphasis on form and autonomy.

With the paradoxical phrase of an "impossible position" Bourdieu does not resolve the opposition between the "genius" founders of new horizons of discourse and the sociological view of their concrete social conditionedness one-sidedly and reductionistically. Instead, he succeeds in carrying out this opposition in a way that is full of tension. This means that he can do justice to the "genius" achievement of individuals, but without ignoring the social frame of reference; indeed, "genius" is even found specifically in simultaneously articulating and obscuring this frame of reference in literary language, whereby the institutionalized form of autonomy

of the artist-subjectivity converges with the formal autonomy of its works. Nevertheless, the philosophical problem at the base of this remains open: how at all and under which conditions social dynamics – the changing of existing fields and the establishing of new ones – can be explained within a context based on the largely static reproduction of the respective habitus.[3] Ultimately, this also applies to Bourdieu's own critical endeavor: How can it be understood beyond a purely field-specific positioning, in other words habitually and competitively separating itself from other contestants in the field of social theory? Here too, an "impossible position" must be really be assumed as the starting point, from which Bourdieu developed a critique intended to address the order of fields and the hegemonic order of the field of power. It seems obvious now to ask about the conditions, under which "impossible positions" can be assumed, and whether the engaged position evolving from this can be described at all with a theoretical position. For either all individual scopes are broader than theory allows for, or Bourdieu's own stance could be based on one of the illusions that he repeatedly described in relation to others, perhaps on a habitus of the critical.

A Critical Field

This question of a possible habitus of the critical is interesting, to the extent that it is certainly possible to observe social phenomena suggesting that social circumstances tend more to be reproduced than altered in a certain gesture of critique, and that social inequalities may even be more reinforced than resolved. This includes the ongoing boom of a vague "criticality" as cultural capital within broad sections of pop culture and the art field, such as pop stars ingratiating themselves with radical political movements or rampant culture-critical rhetorics of loss and

downfall. Even the acute interest in conspiracy theories tends to indicate more of a surplus than a scarcity of critique, because their problem consists specifically in generating "more" critique than is good for rational insight. It would undoubtedly also be possible to cite contrary examples that indicate a withdrawal of critical positions in neoliberal times. What interests me here, though, is not an unequivocal culmination of a diagnosis of the times, nor an evaluation of Bourdieu's engagement, but rather the question of how critique can be founded at all, and if it can be founded, whether it must include habitual aspects, because it is not even thinkable as a pure form. As a specific moment of theory intentionally tending towards practice, but without having arrived there yet, critique is consistently articulated from a precarious, intermediate or "undisciplinary"[4] state, which makes the respective historical conditionedness – whether of a social, cultural or directly political nature – most clearly visible. By introducing horizons of value, making contexts speak or suggesting practical consequences, critique transgresses the logic of pure theory. It is no wonder then, that it easily becomes entangled in a mesh of opinions. As a cultural and/or political form, it seems to me in any case that it cannot be purely theoretically grounded, just as little as its practical equivalents can – from grumbling to outrage all the way to engagement. In other words, critique itself has to live with a quantum of contradictoriness and ambivalence; it is not per se on the right side. As a cultural and political form it necessarily remains debatable. Yet perhaps this is also exactly where its chance is to be found.

The question that follows from this is whether a principal distinction can be made between these kinds of cultural forms of the critical and stringently theoretical or academic critique, or even between the "scholastic" rhetorics as an academic form of critique

and research that is close to practice, empirical and reflexive. Bourdieu even seems to want to intensify these kinds of principal distinctions, when he presumes a kind of unified truth regime, a "doxa", behind the whole scholastic intellectual, moralist universalist and aesthetic illusion, the unmasking of which he ascribes to himself again and again with a "critical sociology". As important as these individual points of critique may be, it ultimately still remains unclear at the theoretical level, to what extent a program of this kind is supposed to differ from a purely field-specific positioning. If critical or political positionings can never be strictly and categorically distinguished from field-specific positionings, then consequently it would seem that critique cannot be conceived theoretically as an unequivocal endeavor either. It is the differentiation into different, often contradictory cultural forms, practical modes of articulation, and statement positions starting from the different fields that would first allow a separate field of critique to emerge, which requires more thorough investigation.

A Sociology of Critique?

Luc Boltanski's turn against Bourdieu in the 1980s could serve as a starting point for this kind of investigation. As Jörg Pottast summarized the conflict:

> "For Bourdieu's *critical sociology*, self-deception was said to be the precondition for the possibility of social order, whereas the *sociology of critique* purportedly took processes of critique as an internal moment of social order, therefore striving to develop possibility conditions of critique. Boltanski recommends stopping the study of the 'illusion per se' and investigating the 'accusation per

> se' instead. This corresponds to his conviction that we do not live in a society of illusion, in which the social order is based on the active self-deception of nearly all its members, but rather in a 'critical society'."[5]

In his investigation of public accusations in letters to the editor to the newspaper *Le Monde*[6], Boltanski called for making explicit the notions of social justice at the theoretical level, on which both critical sociology and every social outrage are based, as well as focusing attention on the more uncanny forms of the critical, such as querulousness, in which the habitus of the critical shows itself from its more unpleasant side. Both suggestions seem important to me, although not sufficient as a foundation for a sociology of critique. Nor has a sociology of critique really been presented in the meantime.[7] It would be needed, however, to address phenomena such as those described above of a "mainstreaming" of critique, generally its various cultural forms (such as literature and art criticism, artist critique, cultural or social criticism, abut also everyday criticism in the form of a know-it-all attitude and querulousness), including their different value horizons. In addition, there are also the problems that have increased in recent years, arising from the contradictions inscribed in the project of enlightenment itself, when social, gender, ethnic or sexual differences no longer appear in a minoritarian unified and principally parallelizable perspective, but are instead prioritized or even oppositionally positioned individually.[8] This applies not only to dubious manifestations like the homophobic black rapper or the conservative German politician proceeding against migrants with an Islamic background in the name of women's rights, but also to the question of whether the uniformity of the "struggle" against all forms of social discrimination is not itself based on a generalization of a victim position, so that the multiple

entanglements of social actors in respectively other forms of discrimination are overlooked.

The problem of a sociology of critique, however, is that it tends to relativize critical demands and can thus hardly still identify itself as a critical project. A significant portion of critical sociology is thus certainly still needed within a sociology of critique itself, so that it does not end up as a "scholastic" form of pure categorization. Conversely, however, it also seems that a critical sociology is hardly imaginable now without undertaking the differentiations that stem from a sociology of critique. Bourdieu's own theory of power would be an excellent starting point for a critical sociology. Unlike other theories of power, it allows regarding the actors in an individual field both as dominated and dominating[9], and at the same time, since individual actors may also belong to different fields, to take the differentness of their statement positions into account. That means that my critical articulations as an ordinary person, as a professional art critic and academic attempting to gain a foothold in diverse artistic, cultural or political fields, as a male white citizen of the European Union of a certain age, income and sexual identity, cannot always be reconciled, least of all in the sense of a universal claim to truth. Critique thus always comes from a certain direction; it is already influenced by the location from which it is expressed, by the logics of the field-specific regulations, so that its view is never "pure" or "archimedian". On the contrary, it has always already been in relation to the field of power, which according to Bourdieu partly overlaps the other fields. Critique thus has an extremely ambivalent relationship to power – it can also be understood as incorporated cultural capital, and no matter how radically it questions the "system", in some cases this can be a precise expression of the system itself, for instance in the sense of academic competition for the most radical position. To draw from

this the consequence, in Luhmann's sense, that any critique can only be an expression of systemic regulation would be too simple. To be able to differentiate here, it is important for every critical endeavor to maintain a perspective of the historical conditionedness of critique itself.

The aspiration to make explicit the inherent value horizons of the critical, as Boltanski calls for, can indeed tie into Bourdieu's theoretical conception of field and habitus structurally. Yet still the problem remains of how and which values can be negotiated at all by the social actors – even if they are the most critical. Bourdieu's approach starts from Ernst Cassierer's distinction between substantial and functional or relational methods of explanation. Consistently dispensing with a concept of society that tends to substantialize it, Bourdieu only speaks of social space, which in turn consists of various fields, although these are only illustrated as coordinate systems of various arrangements of social actors. Within these fields the individual actors fight with one another for recognition. At the same time, they respectively reproduce in a thoroughly open form a certain habitus, in which social traditions and cohesion as family, class or nation are expressed. Despite the strongly determinant moment of the habitus, it reproduces itself not as a stringent structure, but allows its actors scope in the respective realization. Indeed, the moment of autonomy of the decisions made in the course of confrontations increases with respect to the conditioning forces of the habitual. Nevertheless, the image of the social that Bourdieu draws remains strictly related in the classical liberal sense to individuals and their battles for position among one another. This is also the foundation for the consistently relational approach. All collective forms are nothing but "illusions", which merely serve to maintain certain privileges and are to be understood as advantages or disadvantages in the

battles for position. Rivalry is the central source of motivation. The binding emotional aspects that are inherent to collectives, whether they are positive aspects like security and a sense of belonging or negative ones like dependency, only occur in this as preconditions for these battles. This raises the fundamental question of whether these are really only chimeras that a strictly relational sociology can do without, or indeed constitutive realities that can hardly be substantially grounded, but which are usually understood by the social actors precisely as substantial in developing their historical and cultural force of impact and should perhaps also be addressed at this level for the same reason. For they are often the source of the value horizons and motivation resources, according to which social and cultural phenomena are ordered and from which orientation assistance is derived. Perhaps they even contribute to imagining the "impossible position" of critique as being outside the rivalrous battles.

Between the Fields

The American philosopher associated with "Communitarianism", Michael Walzer, expressly pointed out both the historical conditionedness of critique and its implicit value horizons. For the archimedian or external critique he asserts religion-typological (prophetical), psychological (warding off one's own passions) and social moments (the distance to the social groups in whose name upheavals as radical as possible are propagated).[10] Conversely, he propagates an inner or immanent critique, which starts from the norms that the society, to which the critique is directed, feels bound to. In fact, the connection between socially accepted and critical views is often closer than the ideology-critical perspective wants to acknowledge, and an immanent critique would probably actually be more transparent in terms of its value horizons than an

external critique. Nevertheless, a critique understood as purely immanent, based only on the concrete or the particular, also elicits a sense of unease about what should distinguish this kind of critique from pure reformism. Bourdieu's field theory reasoning for the social space and his theory of power based on it indicate a way out here, as internal and external positions – depending on their localization in the various fields – have always already been related to one another in multiple ways: a pure outside of the fields seems just as little possible as a pure inside, because the fields are differentiated by referring to one another. The solution cannot be a simple statement position of the critical "between the fields", because every position can always be assigned to several fields. Assuming a separate critical field between the factually differentiated fields and the field of power would have the advantage, however, of addressing these in-between fields as a special sphere of critique. This would be in terms of their somewhat questionable cultural formations as well as their chances of being able to escape their own factual field logic again and again, being able to establish references between the fields and to the field of power. It is exactly here that an "impossible position" would be situated, because it is highly improbable within a critical field, can hardly be taken advantage of intentionally, and yet necessarily suggests the actualization in which the dull reproduction of the habitus is exposed and something unpredictable occurs in the realization of its scopes. Perhaps Bourdieu's own "impossible position" is grounded in his work being the basis for this critical field to become visible.

In this view, the impossible is something improbable that nevertheless repeatedly becomes possible. It remains caught in the paradox that it is intentionally strived for – otherwise it would not be critique – without a critical effect necessarily really arising from

it. This effect depends on the imponderability of the historical situation, on the concrete meaning, with which the critique can imbue the lines of conflict that it makes visible. This is also where the strength of the archimedian critique is found, that it seems to be compelled to react to the historical constellations and – simultaneously "free-floating" and "organic" – makes the relationships dance. Yet the reservations about this form of critique and the "total intellectual" who embodies them are meanwhile myriad, and even Bourdieu himself frequently voiced them.[11] One of their problems is that they are in fact predictable in their recurrent appearance, which makes it more likely that their critical impulse is reduced. This can at least be countered, if the critical act wraps itself up less in "the total" and "universal", but remains related to its theoretical and practical side on the one hand, and on the other introduces a self-reflexive moment in terms of its field-specific localization as well as in terms of individual habitual forms as an intentional authorship of critique.[12]

For Bourdieu, however, self-reflexivity primarily refers to the academic and cultural milieu, in which his own work is also negotiated as theory, but not to the "critical field", from which the engaged claim first emerged. Institutional and discourse critique, as so brilliantly presented in *Homo Academicus*, should accordingly also be extended to the critical field. In keeping with this, many moments can also be found, which argue for instance against the "total" intellectual in Jean Paul Sartre's sense. However, Bourdieu's own model of an academically founded collective of experts[13] equally obscures the imponderability of the critical endeavor as well. Yet specifically the self-reflection of one's own critical habitus could be seen as the positive opportunity to be able to critically envision the manifold cultural entanglements and contradictory political lines of conflict of every critical act as well.

The categorial separation between scholastic and practical knowledge also seems to block the relational field between theory and practice, which is marked by a fundamental tension that cannot be resolved even by theory as close to practice as possible. In comparison with a tendency to merge theory, critique and practice, it seems to me that their differentiation as different cultural and political forms is crucial. The concept of autonomy actually points out the way in this direction, even if it remains somewhat opaque with Bourdieu. It is not sufficient to understand it as institutionalized social autonomy, but rather more in the sense of an independence or specifically autonomy as categories, which can then of course be related to one another in multiple ways. For when theory, critique and practice do not merely reproduce their scopes (and only question them or newly found them in individual cases), then the respective field is always already reproduced at the same time and questioned, founded and dissolved again. One is not even possible without the other, and the relativity of the differences first defines the possibility space of what we could call the political. Autonomy as categories is here the precondition for the diversity of forms of relations. Thus a theory proposes and implies, for instance, specific notions of the social and excludes others. Critical objections and claims are in turn derived from these notions. Theory and critique also propose forms of practice, partly even those that oppose themselves. Practice can also stimulate questions about what purposes theory and critique should even serve. A broad field of cultural in-between spaces opens up here: it grounds the concrete possibilities of reflection to explicate the exchange relations among the fields and thus question their apparent autonomy again.

This has the advantage that questions about the relationship between the various cultural forms of critique can also be posed as

questions of their respective positioning in the various fields. Then artistic, cultural, political or everyday critique no longer appear as a parallelizable endeavor oriented to uniform objectives, but rather as modes of articulation multiply related to, with, or even contrary to one another, whose convergent and competing forms of behavior can first be meaningfully reflected on from this point. For depending on the circumstances, political critique can mean something completely different from artistic critique – the contexts of the respective field usually contour the horizons of meaning. This is also how critics as concrete social actors first come into view, as actors who attack power and exercise power at the same time. The cross-field points of reference of their respective critique are thereby able to question the mechanisms of their own field, but they can also confirm them as projections onto other fields. For this reason, the question of how to deal with the habitual moments of critique is also important. How can a distinction be made, for instance, between outrage in the face of unbearable social conditions and a perpetually recurring attitude of outrage, for which the respectively targeted objects seem to be largely interchangeable? How can political forms of relations be described in the categories of perpetrators and victims without deriving the entire political legitimation from a pure, perhaps imagined or projected, victim position? The proportionalities that are meant here determine the "civil" quality of the political, and as horizons of discourse they also make the different formats of the exchange between political and cultural codes assessable. This particularly applies to the proportionality of means and ends. To what extent are political campaigns, for instance, already legitimized by their objectives, and how resistant can they therefore be to critical objections? For critique does not simply prepare practice, it also has to accompany it, if practice is not to be oriented to sheer efficiency, but still to political categories. This applies not only to

the concrete forms of procedures of political practice, but also to the value horizons to which we orient them. As objectives of critique and practice, these value horizons in turn have more to do with collective, habitual modes of existence than with individual struggles. For what is it that makes us so sensitive to injustice, what drives us to outrage, if not the "brotherly/sisterly" experiences that we perceive and acquire in the various collective modes of being. If we were really all just competitive, individualistic "monsters", then we would not really care about the "misery of the world". It is not the individualistic, insatiably greedy and, at the same time, ideologically completely blinded "locust capitalists" that seem to me to be the problem today, but rather the simultaneity of an unbroken accumulation of different types of capital among most people with a constantly bad conscience, which in turn drives the charity and donations economies that in recent decades have become established almost as the dominant form of value creation – in both the moral and the economic sense. As cultural articulations, these kinds of ideological formations, inherently highly problematic, but certainly not one-dimensional, co-determine the contexts and thus also the possibility space, in which critique and political practice can develop today.

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[1] Pierre Bourdieu, Die feinen Unterschiede. Kritik der gesellschaftlichen Urteilskraft, Frankfurt am Main 1987, p. 17 (orig.: *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit (VIII+670 pages)

[2] Pierre Bourdieu, Meditationen. Zur Kritik der scholastischen Vernunft, Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 116 (orig.: *Méditations*

pascaliennes. Éléments pur une philosophie négative, Paris: Seuil (322 pages)

[3] On this, see: Jörg Ebrecht, Die Kreativität der Praxis. Überlegungen zum Wandel von Habitusformationen, in: Jörg Ebrecht, Frank Hillebrandt (Ed.) Bourdieus Theorie der Praxis. Erklärungskraft – Anwendung – Perspektiven, Wiesbaden 2004, p. 225 -241

[4] Ruth Sonderegger says the strength of critique is in being "undisciplinary".

[5] Jörg Potthast, "Soziologie und Kritik. Ein Theorievergleich zum Problem der Politisierung sozialer Ungleichheit", in: Jörg Ebrecht, Frank Hillebrandt (Ed.) *Bourdieus Theorie der Praxis. Erklärungskraft – Anwendung – Perspektiven*, Wiesbaden 2004, p. 191

[6] On this see: Jörg Potthast, op.cit., p. 182

[7] Although sociology of critique has become a widely discussed buzz word following Boltanski and Bruno Latour's *Why has Critique Run out of Steam*, it does not appear to me that it has yet been truly realized. This also applies to Luc Boltanski/Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, in which the function of critique for the renewal of capitalist accumulation strategies is debated at length, which could also be an explanation for the current cultural need for critique, but the distinction between social critique and artist critique does not seem to me to be sufficient to cover especially the uncanny forms of the critical, particularly the colorful forms of cultural critique among all political camps.

[8] Examples of this might include Alice Schwarzer's conflicts with multi-culturally oriented migration research or Slavoj Zizek's polemics against any form of minoritarian politics.

[9] Bourdieu ascribes this primarily to the intellectuals, but other social groups could undoubtedly also be named.

[10] Michael Walzer, Kritik und Gemeinsinn. Drei Wege der Gesellschaftskritik, Frankfurt am Main 1993 (orig.: *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Harvard University Press, 1987)

[11] Cf. Ulf Wuggenig, "Vom 'Modell Sartre' zum kollektiven Intellektuellen. Bourdieu, das intellektuelle Feld und der Algerienkrieg", in: *Literatur* (supplement to Mittelweg 36), No. 3, June/July 2006, Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, p. 64 - 71

[12] On the concept of an authorship of critique, see: Helmut Draxler, *Gefährliche Substanzen. Zum Verhältnis von Kritik und Kunst*, Berlin 2007, p. 127

[13] Cf. Ulf Wuggenig, op.cit.