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Critique and Truth

For a New Mode of Critique

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1. Starting with Critique from the Beginning

According to a long tradition of ideology critique, the relationship between critique and truth seems to be a very simple one. Critique speaks in the name of a truth and proves that an appearance obstructs it. The appearance has something to do with the essence of things, of which it is the appearance; nevertheless, it is false, either because it is only a limited aspect or because it represents an illusion. This world behind the essential can be defined as truth: people are actually free and equal, they are essentially communicative or political. Critique itself appears to be merely a negative act of revealing, an act to which little attention needs to be paid. The entire model of this type of critique and truth no longer appears plausible to us: we take the surface of the appearance more seriously, no longer believe in the world of a deeper truth behind it, because truth is a collective practice that we carry out. Most of all, however, the activity of critique is no longer to be taken for granted. In a materialist perspective today we take a closer look at the practice of critique and ask what we do when we criticize, which power we exercise and where critique will lead us.

This turn in the relationship to critique obviously took place in the 1960s.

Michel Foucault was probably right when he stated this in his lecture of 7 January 1976. “So I would say: for the last ten or fifteen years, the immense and proliferating criticizability of things, institutions, practices, and discourses; a sort of general feeling that the ground was somehow cracked, even and especially that which seemed most familiar and solid to us and closest to us, our body, our everyday gestures.” (Foucault 1977a, 217) Foucault said that something unexpected happened in this process. The theories that provided the locally usable instruments of critique, in other words Marxism and psychoanalysis, proved to be inhibiting to the extent that they wanted to be comprehensive, blanket theories. With the development of local critique, however, the discursive unity of those theories was destroyed, shredded, ripped apart, postponed, caricatured, theatricalized. In an interview conducted in the same year, Foucault pointed out the consequences. He said there was no more orientation, models of political action were devalued through the violence carried out in the name of theory. “The left, the whole thinking of the European left, revolutionary European thinking, which had its points of reference in the whole world and developed them in a specific way [...], this thinking [...] lost its historical reference points for the first time, which it had previously found in other parts of the world. [...] We must start over again from the beginning and ask ourselves what we can base the critique of our society on in a situation, in which the previously implicit or explicit foundation of our critique has broken away. [...] It must be possible to start from the beginning. To start again from the beginning with analysis and critique.” (Foucault 1977b, 514)

With his deliberations, Foucault articulates three things: 1) Critique has lost its foundation, because it was linked in a certain

way with history – which raises the question of what critique is. 2) The speaking genre of critique is not abandoned, but rather there is a will to critique that requires us to start again from the beginning and continue. Yet how is this will to be explained, which is linked with a mood, a passion, a feeling, with a morality or ethics of critique? 3) If critique has lost its pillar in reality, but we sense the will and the passion for critique, then it needs a new ground. In the following I intend to address primarily this latter problem and show that our critique still adheres to an old, if not to say bourgeois model, and that it is too modest.

Since the 1970s there have been several ambitious approaches to analyzing critique and, based on this, to re-grounding it: What is our practice when we express critique, which objective forms of thinking do we claim in this way? Both the analysis and the grounding in turn follow disciplinary game rules. Philosophers tend to reformulate critique in universal and moral terms and to seek a foundation, whereas sociologists ask more about typological patterns of critique, their dissemination and their effects.

2. The Philosophical Analysis of Critique

At first glance Michael Walzer's ideas seem to have a certain affinity to Foucault's call for local critique. I call his ideas philosophical, because they ask from the start about the foundation of critique. Walzer sees this foundation in moral norms, and he says that these moral principles for social critique are to be found in our everyday world and that critique represents a basic characteristic of everyday morality. When he goes on to investigate the practice of critiques, he does so with an analysis of the different modes of relating to moral norms. Walzer develops three possibilities for normatively grounding social critique. He calls the

first strategy the path of discovery. In this case the critique claims to have discovered moral laws, the principles of critique. This may be a revelation or a theory of true and false needs, natural rights of human beings or the general principles of reason. In any case the moral principles are an objective truth that it is simply up to the discoverer to announce. The moral world seems like a new continent and the discoverer is the guide. It is obvious that the discoverer will claim the privilege of guiding and insisting on what has just been recognized. However, if the new moral world is settled by many people, the moral principles lose their capacity for critique. All that is left is to re-discover the once discovered moral, but meanwhile lost and corrupted theory again. In other words, the discovery wants to be repeated, but it cannot be repeated. The result is therefore conflict over the right moral principles and proper guidance.

On the second path of social critique moral principles are invented. This involves the work of men and women who represent us and who invent a method, according to which we all take part in the procedure, which allows us to reach a consensus. Authority is not found in the objective world, but in the procedure. Like a law-giving body, the inventors want to create a moral world, in which everyone is represented and in which justice, political virtue and the good life are realized. They create what God would have created, if he existed. People must be purified from every particularism; the moral principles they all live by would be elements of a minimal morality that provides equality and protection. Yet this is not a dense moral culture, in which people could develop a sense of belonging.

Both of these two types of critique have a tendency to become authoritarian. In both cases critique appeals to general principles that disregard concrete individuals and their everyday life. These

are principles that are initially accessible to philosophers, which the philosophers must in turn insinuate to the others. But that which is to be achieved, moral life, is already undermined, if individuals only come into focus as universalistically motivated. The principles of critique come from the outside. This is different in the case of the third path, which Walzer favors, the path of interpretation or adjudication. Arguing morally takes advantage of the moral principles that have long been available to the local community. It is our moral understanding that we do not need to first discover or invent, but which we already refer to in everyday life, which we interpret in the light of special problems and that we talk about with other members of the community. Critique of what is already there starts with principles that are inherent to what is already there, because it is our community – and this is why the critique can accrue authority, as it obligates solely because the morality exists that it claims.

Walzer's proximity to Marx' conception of critique, playing the circumstances' own music back to them, is obvious. However, I want to state my reservations about Walzer's theories (cf. also Demirović 1993, 505f.). First of all, there could be the objection that Walzer's argument imputes what is to be proved and argued: namely that critical activity exists. Walzer derives from the Old Testament, in Christian terms, that there is a practice of critique that is already thousands of years old. From this he takes the impression that it has always only been a matter of immanent critique in the context of a respective community and its moral tradition. This reading presumes Judeo-Christian continuity as a given. However, this overlooks what is specifically linked with critique in a double sense: the will to critique is itself something historically new; and critique not only demands the realization of intentions announced in the past and defined principles, it also

questions the past and paves the way for a new future. It aims for improvements in everyday life and fundamental changes in the circumstances of life for the many. For this, however, it cannot refer to the past; its task specifically consists in supplying impulses for new measures. Marx recognized this at an early stage. Radical critique changes from a merely immanent critique into a transcendental critique: "We do not face the world with a new doctrinal principle: Here is the truth, bow down! We develop new principles for the world from the principles of the world." (Marx 1843, 345) By rejecting the notion that critique always moves from itself to an external measure to find a distance from what is criticized, the dialectical movement between inside and outside is forestalled. "In fact, the dialectical turn of cultural critique must not hypostasize the measures of culture. It remains flexible towards them by acknowledging its position in the whole. Without this kind of freedom, without leaving the consciousness of the immanence of culture, immanent critique itself would be unimaginable: only those are capable of following the self-movement of the object who do not completely belong to it." (Adorno 1951, 23)

The second argument is directed against the local character of critique. It may be that the moral principles of critique are found within a community, but these are the principles of just this limited community. But what if this community closes itself off from others through a religious identity or a biological affiliation and thus also becomes immune to critique? What if critique could only be expressed by those belonging to this community and all other critics were accused of being prejudiced and hostile towards the criticized community? Since there seems to be a certain proximity between Foucault and Walzer in this point, it is interesting to note that Foucault sees the weakness of local critique

himself. Yet when he speaks of the local critique of the specific intellectuals, he emphasizes that they are in danger of "limiting themselves to struggles conditioned by the circumstances, to sector-related demands; the risk of being manipulated by political parties or union apparatuses in conducting these local struggles. Most of all the risk of not being able to further develop these struggles without a global strategy and external supports." (Foucault 1977c, 209) At this point, an initial conclusion may be drawn. Critique is risky in a twofold way: not only do critics expose themselves to risks with their critical activity, but critique can also itself become usurpatory and authoritarian. Critique can distance itself from what is criticized to such an extent that it loses its binding character, or it can remain too close to the object. From this it follows that critique must be inherently flexible, it must be local and global at the same time, it must be immanent and transcendent.

3. On the Sociology of Critique

There are sociological attempts to investigate the social practice of critique and to determine the manner in which critique is exercised and the impacts that the respective modes of critique have. This has been carried out at length by Boltanski and Chiapello. Their view is that anti-capitalist critique is as old as capitalism and that there are four aspects that are reason for outrage: a) Capitalism is understood as the source of the missing authenticity of things, people and emotions. b) Capitalism is seen as the source of oppression, control and discipline, constraining liberty, autonomy and creativity. c) Capitalism is regarded as the source of poverty and inequality. d) To the extent that it promotes selfishness, it destroys solidarity and social cohesion. According to Boltanski and Chiapello, these different motives of outrage cannot easily be

integrated into a coherent framework, and they group them into two types of critique: artist critique and social criticism. Artist critique objects to the loss of meaning, the standardization of commodity society, the alienation of human beings, turning against planning, rational organization or a distribution of labor. Social criticism is directed against selfish particularism, indifference and impoverishment. Both types of critique can merge, but they can also hostilely oppose one another. The social protests of '68 are seen as the result of combining both types of critique. The more cultural critique of missing authenticity and alienation, of meaninglessness, discipline and control went hand in hand with the social criticism of exploitation and inequality. The protests derived their strength from the articulation of these critiques, but this was subsequently also the source of their weakness. For artist critique and social criticism were divided again through targeted counter-strategies from those criticized, in other words from the enterprise camp and the government. Both forms of critique were absorbed. Social criticism of work routine, forms of discipline, hierarchy, productivity demands, was transformed into a series of economic compromise solutions: wage policy concessions and minimum wage, marginal income differences, profit shares or longer paid holiday time, employment security, continuing education. These kinds of measures led to a series of social improvements, but they bypassed the central motives of dissatisfaction. Artist critique, which was reflected in the revolts against the predominant working conditions, was absorbed in that businesses paid more attention to the individual needs of the employees, gave them more responsibility within the framework of quality circles, semi-autonomous production groups or opinion groups, and strengthened their autonomy and right to participate. Boltanski and Chiapello summarize that the most important goal of the employers, namely taking control in the business again, was

not reached by expanding the classical instruments of control, but rather by endogenizing demands for autonomy and self-responsibility in the form of self-control.

In comparison with Walzer, two things may be noted. First of all: under capitalist conditions the formation of radical and external critique occurs again and again, which is obviously based on the contingency of capitalist patterns of reproduction. This always presents itself in a twofold way: on the one hand as naturally produced and on the other as socially produced and thus also imaginable in a completely different way. Secondly: this critique that comes from outside and is all-comprehensive has effects. However, it has so far not dissolved the natural coherence of capitalist society, but instead led to a higher level of exploitation and oppression, which makes it hard for the traditional forms of critique, because they are thus devalued. This was not taken into account. Horkheimer and Adorno had anticipated that in light of the tendency towards a managed world, social criticism would slip into an increasingly eccentric and marginalized position without further impact, but then they were able to note a specific effect of critique after all. Critical social theory and the protest movement did not halt the development in the direction of total integration, but certainly interrupted it. Critique was able to take over the function of delaying, to intermittently incite asynchronicity, to change the rhythm of the development and thus make time, preserving the remains of a social life that could then become the starting point for new critique. Examples of this are found in the universities or the unions. Boltanski and Chiapello continue with a Gramscian argumentation. Critique led to a passive revolution of fordist capitalism. The powerful actors absorbed both social critics and artist critics and strategically reorganized social conditions by means of this critique, so that the result in a long-term tendency is

a new form of capitalist societization, of which we have seen the corporatist phase with the practice of neoliberalism in the past twenty years (cf. Demirović 2008). Boltanski and Chiapello observe the renewal of both forms of critique in this point. New forms of inequality arise through exploitation, which is now linked with exclusion from the networks of mobility and communication; and new forms of consumerism, alienation and meaninglessness arise.

Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis occasions two critical reflections. First of all, a closer look must be taken at the elements of meaning in critique in their distribution, their articulation and their hegemonic condensation. If the articulation of critique, as Boltanski and Chiapello propose, is the focal point solely in two chains of signification and the formation of two empty signifiers, the social and the aesthetic, then the diversity of critiques is reduced. It is equally problematic that Boltanski and Chiapello espouse an understanding of critique, according to which the motifs of outrage and dissatisfaction must a priori assume the two forms of social and artist critique, thus suggesting a virtually objectively existing distance between the two. This ignores the cultural significance of social criticism as well as the social dimension of artist critique. It also disregards the fact that there are different social forces connected with these critiques. The intellectual discussions and the processes of generalization, which critiques are developed and implemented, are left unconsidered. The conclusion is correct that various forms of critique must conjoin into a unity, if a social movement is to be able to emerge and be successful. Nevertheless, the articulation process and the dynamics of hegemonic condensation are unnecessarily curtailed. The conclusion is also problematic that a disarticulation of moments of critique can only occur along the line of division between social criticism and artist critique.

Secondly, critique must take into consideration its future absorption and function in a passive revolution. Capitalist societies are characterized by internal and external critique. It is not the case that capitalist society increasingly closes itself into a system and makes critique impossible; in contrast, however, it is also not the case that a greater opening and possibility of critique always arises. What the bourgeois formation involves instead is an organism that is constantly revolutionizing and transforming itself. The constitutive characteristic of the modernity of bourgeois society is that it is perpetually overtaking itself in contradictory processes. This ongoing revolution takes on various forms; along with science and the permanent falsification of insights or of art and its processes of the constant self-radicalization of the avant-gardes, it especially assumes the political form of democracy.

4. The Political Theory of Critique

At this point we can move on to the third discipline field, that of political theory, and pursue the train of thought of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. According to them, freedom and equality constitute a symbolic space of democracy. Individuals and social groups move in this space, taking the norms of freedom and equality as the reference point for their critique, questioning the conditions under which they live as to whether they live equally and freely, and claiming to realize this freedom and equality. Freedom and equality become the matrix of the social imaginary, which propels individuals and allows them to construct an antagonism between democratic struggles and domination again and again. The construction of an antagonism means: articulating elements of meaning in a discourse, so that a meaning is at least temporarily fixed. In this case the meaning appears to be logically necessary and virtually natural, so that a circumstance or an object

seems to have just this one meaning and no other – which is also actually the case for this special discourse, in which the discursive element takes on a meaning. Yet this articulation in a hegemonic discourse is not all. The diversity of meanings overflows the respective formation of equivalence within a discourse. Inequality and the lack of freedom are found in ever new aspects of everyday life and taken as the starting point of the antagonism towards those who are regarded as antagonists in the process of the formation of equivalence and as those who hinder freedom and equality. It is not a matter of the one and fundamental opposition, the democratic struggles specifically consist of ever new antagonisms being constructed in the hegemonic process, ever new subjects forming, who want to realize freedom and equality in ever new facets. For every hegemonic success in implementing freedom and equality necessarily creates new forms of exclusion, inequality and a lack of freedom, thus contributing to the formations of identities that were previously unknown. Sometimes a multiplication of critique and conflictuality arises, as critique seems to drive society on, dissolving existing interests, institutions and identities and contributing to the formation of new ones. This process can be understood as the institutionalization of democratic revolution. In this context critique is imbued with the function of liquefying conditions that have become melted, objectified, naturalized by invoking freedom and equality, highlighting the moment of the dynamics.

Yet the picture would be incomplete without taking the following additional perspective into consideration, which applies to the performance of the analysis itself. One could say that critiques in the course of execution are subordinated to a much more essential critique, which is regarded as the theory of democracy: the theories of Habermas, Walzer or Mouffe should be understood less as an

objective statement about that which democracy is or should be, but rather as a speech act, as a specific practice of expression. It guards and regulates the dynamics of critique by taking care of its economy and deployment, by issuing the warning: no demand for equality and freedom may posit itself as absolute. That means that hegemony must lead to an equivalence that unifies a multitude of signifiers into a discourse. Yet this identity that has become hegemonic, this society once constituted must not close itself off in a totalitarian way from the game of differences, which are asserted in the critique, scandalizing exclusion, inequality or the lack of freedom and urging a new articulation of the signifiers, a new hegemony. This results in an interplay of dynamics and statics, and the game itself is watched over – the theory of democracy watches that it is played and played correctly, that everyone plays it with the right attitude: dissolving what has become what it is, newly establishing a hegemonic chain of meaning and fixing the meanings, finally liquefying the sense. If freedom and equality are pursued as goals, it is only at the price of never being realized. Critique is limited to dissolving again what tends towards naturalization, objectification.

5. The New Mode of Critique: On the Critique of Democratic Revolution

Here we could take a step back to further radicalize the concept of critique. Adorno pointed out that there is something static even in the changes newly effected by critique. One can speak with passion and enthusiasm about permanent critical impulses and changes – and many authors have done so to reject the totalitarian, the traditional, the fundamentalist social conditions taking root and refusing every inquiry, and to set society and its members in motion. Yet something blindly organic adheres even to this

dynamic itself. What is antagonistic about the antagonistically progressing society is its own static, that which has not changed since pre-history. “The urge to expand, to devour ever new sectors, to leave less and less out, has so far been statically invariable. In this way the flaw is reproduced in an expanded form. [...] That was their eternity. Progress, which ended prehistory, would be the end of this kind of dynamic. [...] A good society would suspend both. It would neither hold onto mere being, that which fetters man for the sake of an order [...], nor would it continue to provide the blind movement, the antagonist of eternal peace, the Kantian goal of history.” (Adorno 1961, 232) Critique operates as a catalyst in this interplay of static and dynamic, critique is absorbed, the formation of capitalist society is renewed through critique and newly releases critique to disrupt the circumstances. In its way it contributes to these circumstances being reproduced at a higher and higher level. Individuals are in turn subjectified through critique. For if freedom and equality become the social imaginary with bourgeois society and the French Revolution, then this means that individuals perpetually chase this goal of freedom and equality that they can never reach. But by seeking to reach this goal, they subjectify themselves as free and equal individuals who are searching. Consequently the subject cannot dispense with the ideas of freedom and equality and the goal of their realization, because it is constituted itself through the claim to their realization – being a subject that did not want to be free and equal would be unthinkable.

Kant developed this dynamic of freedom that always misses the mark in principle (cf. Kant 1788, 48f). In psychological empirical terms, it is self-evident that the humans are not free, but causally determined; in comparison the concept of freedom seems to be just as indispensable as incomprehensible from a transcendental

perspective and proves to be a regulative concept of reason: we need the concept of freedom in order to be able to conceive of a freely acting cause in the empirical world, a self-determining causality, even though specifically this does not exist and everything is physically conditioned. Progressing from cause to cause, reason cannot conceive of a being acting outside of cause and secures a corresponding place in the intelligible world with a concept of freedom tied to moral law. In other words, we must conceive of ourselves as free from a moral perspective and hence responsible for our actions and seek this freedom, not because we can ever reach it, but because we are this freedom as subjects. Marx clearly distanced himself from Kant in this point: "What this reveals, on the other side, is the foolishness of those socialists (namely the French, who want to depict socialism as the realization of the ideals of *bourgeois* society articulated by the French revolution) who demonstrate [...] that history has so far failed in every attempt to implement them [freedom and equality] in their true manner, but that they have now, like Proudhon, discovered e.g. the real Jacob, and intend now to supply the genuine history of these relations in place of the fake. The proper reply to them is: that exchange value or, more precisely, the money system is in fact the system of equality and freedom." (Marx 1857/58, 174) To put it somewhat more paradoxically: striving for freedom through critique does not lead to freedom, but is instead an adjustment mechanism that contributes to the necessary normalization processes in capitalist society; in a finally free society no one would still have to strive for freedom. Freedom conceived of in the absolute sense goes hand in hand with slavery, because it means that some are absolutely free only because everyone else is working for them. Freedom can thus only be grasped as a freedom from ... and a freedom to ..., and it is here that critique has its local, propelling significance. That is not trivial, but neither is it

momentous. Critique that aims for what is new cannot derive its measures simply from previous concepts, for that could prove fatal to it. “The socialism of a certain epoch, namely of the late 19th and early 20th century, maintained that people in capitalist societies do not receive all possibilities for development and realization; that human nature is actually alienated in the system of capitalism. And this socialism dreamt of a human nature that is ultimately to be free. Which model did it use to imagine, to conceive of, to realize this human nature? In fact it was the bourgeois model. [...] The universalization of the bourgeois model was the utopia that inspired the constitution of Soviet society [and that of the people’s democracies].” (Foucault 1974, 619) Foucault thus points out that the authoritarian and totalitarian moment in the tradition of the left results specifically from wanting to realize the bourgeois norms of freedom, self-development and self-realization. This should be the object of critique. Further speculating in terms of hegemonic theory, the superiority of bourgeois society consists in being clever enough that this aspiration to realize its norms is not even its intention, but is instead left to its opponents, who thus always find themselves facing the following trilemma: either they cannot realize the aspiration, but perpetually try again to roll the stone up the hill – in other words corresponding to the Kantian program of the regulative idea; or they realize the norms of equality and freedom and prove themselves to be totalitarian; or they gain insight into the totalitarian tendency and come to the conclusion of grasping these norms only in the ideal sense, that they are to be aspired to, but never really realized and therefore need to be limited from within. This kind of reserve discredits the left and limits its goals.

If critique wants to counter this logic, it must be radical, it must not only criticize all the conditions, under which people are

enslaved, abandoned and despicable. It must analyse and deconstruct the measures of critique, critique itself in terms of its practical functionality and its consequences. The goal of this kind of meta-critical critique is to materialistically and radically imagine the dialectics of these concepts and norms, to which critique refers, finally even the concept of critique itself. It is not a matter of drafting the concepts abstractly, but rather of thinking them through all the way to their limits, in order to grasp the practices associated with them and to firmly negate them; from there it becomes clear that things cannot simply go on in the same way, and what is new about living together can only be imagined and carried out in new concepts. Marx pointed this out: "From the standpoint of a higher economic social formation, single individuals' private ownership of the earth will appear as vulgar as one person's private ownership of another person." (Marx 1894, 784) This consideration also applies to freedom and equality to the extent that these must have become as fixed as popular prejudice, indeed objective forms of thought, if the regular exchange of goods for money is to be carried out (cf. Marx 1867, 74). Where the concepts of freedom and equality turn around and cancel themselves out, a state would ultimately arise – according to Adorno – in which individuals are no longer measured against a criterion of equivalence; reconciliation would consist in measureless difference (cf. Demirović 2004).

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