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Rasmus Willig

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Critique with Anthropological Authority:
A Programmatic Outline for a Critical Sociology

Rasmus Willig
University of Roskilde, Roskilde, Denmark

Abstract

Contemporary conditions show that critique is not necessarily used as a means of emancipation. On the contrary, it has become a well-established weapon for communication strategists in the maintenance of contemporary relations of dominance, and is also utilized as an individualized control function. The anorexic, the depressive, and those suffering from stress or anxiety are all characterized by extremely negative self-criticism and an unbearable weariness of being themselves. The article formulates the first steps towards revitalizing the concept of critique so that it becomes possible to formulate a critical sociology which applies the positive characteristics of the concept as a yardstick for society's moral development.

Keywords
critique, critical sociology, critical theory, immanence, individualized critique, transcendence

Introduction

Ever since its historical beginnings, the primary critical focus of sociology has always been on society's state of crisis and its stigmatizing effects, and on analysing the socio-pathological consequences of each new technological advance. Sociology arose as a 'science of crisis' (Habermas, 1971: 295), concerned with 'social problems' (Nisbet, in Merton and Nisbet, 1971 [1961]: 1–25), 'discrepancies' (Merton, in Merton and Nisbet, 1971 [1961]: 814), 'sufferings' (Bourdieu, 2002 [1993]: 4) or 'pathological development tendencies' (Honneth, 1994a: 49). From the beginning, sociology has thus availed itself of a vocabulary of symptoms when claiming such concepts as 'critique' and 'crisis' (Luhmann, 1991: 147–8), and was therefore also:

from its earliest beginnings, logically and methodically … forced to externalize its own position in order to be able to criticize the immediate social crises. The crisis-like *époques* have thus repeatedly been described as malformed, as something capable of correction. (Luhmann, 1991: 148; author's translation)

Despite the implicit externalization of its normative critique, however, sociology has never possessed a tradition of *explicitly* enumerating the normative principles for a good society. On the contrary, the discipline has almost always only *implicitly*, through its diagnoses of society's distorted developmental tendencies, pointed out what could be regarded as the good society (Willig and Østergaard, 2005). The problem with such implicit reference is that the criticism risks being dismissed as mere 'comments', 'aversions', 'idiosyncrasies' or 'indignation'. An elaboration of the implicit externalizations, on the other hand, might mean that instead of reducing itself to a 'utility science in the service of the public administration' (Habermas, 1971; author's translation), and sociologists to 'knowledge technicians' (Sartre, 1979), sociology might instead assume a critical role in relation to society's developmental tendencies.

Today, however, several systematic attempts have been made to explain critique of society's developmental tendencies with the help of a number of methodological clarifications and normative foundations: from 'competent critique' to 'quasi-competent critique', to an 'incompetent form of critique' (Lepsius, 1997: 511–15); from a 'weak' to a 'strong' justification for social criticism (O'Neill, 2000: 719–28) and from an 'internal' to an 'external' critique (Walzer, 1987: 33–67). Similarly, value judgements can be detected in the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas, which criticizes relations of dominance, as well as in Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, which articulates forms of violations (Honneth, 1994b), Nancy Fraser's theory of redistribution and cultural forms of stigmatization, which criticizes unjust forms of redistribution (Fraser, 1997), and Rainer Forst's normative idea of tolerance, which articulates distorted power relations (Forst, 2003).

But if sociology today is to learn something from this 'normative turn', which has transformed the general theoretical discussion (Seidman and Alexander, 2001: 9), it must not succumb to what American sociologists Steven Seidman and Jeffrey Alexander have described as part of 'the upward turn' – i.e. abstract theorizing. What critical sociology instead requires, if we are to remain within the distinction, is a normative theory that represents 'the downward turn', with a more concrete and empirical presence. Or, as the German sociologist Georg Vobruba phrased it, 'If the intellectual critique is to have any impact on society, then its critical yardstick should not only be found within the intellectuals' own framework conditions, but within the entire social mass' (Vobruba, 2003: 211; author's translation).

The problem, however, is that existing theories of justice that can be presented as justifiable methodological normative foundations are far from empirically present. More precisely, these theories have the following shortcomings: firstly, there is no presentation of empirical evidence in the traditional sense. Very few references are made to sociological or empirical accounts of society's distorted condition.

Secondly, it is clear that these references are employed for the sole purpose of supporting the tangible theoretical apparatus. As a result, facticity is used not as an enlightening

and development-correcting function for the theory, but in reality only as a supporting function with no independent reformist value.

Thirdly, this leads to the peculiar situation in which the sociological theories acquire the status of empirical ersatz facticity. In order to avoid being accused of employing the kind of particularism or communitarianism that merely affirms the existing cultural hegemony, the consequence is that the theories completely or partially abandon context-related, empirical accounts.

Fourthly, this leads to a flimsy, fictive connection with social reality which, at worst, threatens the theory's information-instance to the immanence and thereby risks transcending a flawed normative surplus that functions as a distanced reflexive moment for the designation of unjust conditions.

Fifthly, the conceptual precedence implies the displacement of the possibility for emancipation, since it is no longer the specific results that are the object of change but, on the contrary, the conceptual categorizations that count as the guiding lights for emancipation (Willig, 2007).

For a critical sociological theory which aims to be empirically informed, the task today is therefore to try an untested information-instance that is embedded and shared by the entire immanence of the population masses, and which possesses a certain normative surplus that can be transcended to a re-articulated, normative yardstick. Only when this breeding ground for potential, new, emancipatory movements has been found will it be possible to overcome the fragility of the abstract, normative foundations.

This new approach is now being attempted, on the basis of the thesis that the concept of critique can withstand being subjected to the kind of anthropological thought that investigates the unchangeable pre-conditions for the malleability of human beings.[1] Or, to be more precise, that every subject possesses a form of quasi-naturalistic or essential critical 'ability' or 'impulse' which can be considered as a fundamental pre-condition for human existence. The critical 'impulse' can thus be considered an ahistorical element, whereas the way in which the subject criticizes is historically contingent.

In the following pages, I will proceed in three successive stages to develop these programmatic reflections. It is my hope that the thesis under review may be illustrated by describing a possible way into the immanence which, unfortunately, is not yet sufficiently analytically developed, but will hopefully prove to be qualified as a quasi-invariant human characteristic which, over time, can be developed into a normative basis for sociological diagnosis of contemporary times.[2] Before this is possible, it is important to understand the conceptual repertoire of critique.

Contemporary conditions show that critique is not necessarily used as a means of emancipation. On the contrary, it has become a well-established weapon for communication strategists in the maintenance of contemporary relations of dominance, and is also utilized as an individualized control function (**I**). In the following I will follow up on these observations of situations in which critique possesses no normative surplus but, on the contrary, a deficit, so that it becomes possible to see the pathological consequences of our contemporary, individualized self-criticism for the subject's relation to its self (**II**). This must be done before it will be possible to formulate a number of tentative guidelines, on which basis we

might be able to apply the positive development characteristics of the concept of critique as a yardstick for society's moral development (**III**). Subsequently, in a final stage, I will elaborate on a number of the tasks that must be resolved in order for the hypothesis in question to achieve a substantial theoretical and empirical content (**IV**).

(I) Individualized Critique

Certainly, no-one in the Western, democratized world would dispute the fact that there has been a gradual opening-up for the possibilities of critique. The enormous growth of the mass media has without doubt led to a democratization of critique. The elitist critics no longer possess a monopoly on pointing out society's distorted logic of development, balances of power and pathological conditions. Moreover, the constitutions of the Western democracies are, in the majority of cases, habitually internalized within the subjects' unreflected actions: from injustices of daily life to those of high politics, the subjects react by reflex and give voice to their critical opinions. But along with this democratization, critique has also been individualized and disarmed.

The traditionally trenchant critics who diagnosed society's pathological conditions and functioned as *society's doctors* now function as *spin-doctors*. On the one hand, they diagnose the possibilities of criticizing opponents and competitors, and on the other hand the possibilities of deflecting and redirecting the type of criticism that places their service relationships under pressure. More precisely, this is achieved by transforming social critique into individualized critique. Those who criticize contemporary politics will not be given a response to their criticism at the same level as it was presented: social critique is responded to at an individual level. This displacement necessarily implies a decentralization of the critique presented, which is therefore set aside in favour of the reproduction of the dominant ideological order. There are ample contemporary examples: those who, at a societal level, criticize growing inequality are criticized for being ineligible to offer an opinion unless they have experience from the lowest social strata. Those who, at a societal level, criticize the ever-increasing exclusion of minority cultures, are criticized for being ineligible to offer an opinion unless they themselves represent a minority. Similarly, those who at a societal level criticize the demands for harsher punishments despite falling crime are criticized for being ineligible to express an opinion unless they themselves have been the victims of crime.

However, in this connection it would be a categorically incorrect diagnosis to claim that the earlier collective society appealed only to collective critique, while individualized society appeals only to individual critique. This typified diagnosis assumes that the critique is aimed only from an internal relationship at an external relationship; from a collective or an individual unit against the dominant society's normative demands. But the critical movement is more complicated than first imagined: the relationship can clearly be turned around, so that it is the dominant society which, in a paternalistic tone, directs its critique against its collectives or individuals. However, this is a diagnosis which also falls down on the grounds of the same analytical simplification. Nonetheless, as an analytical approach it is not necessarily irrelevant in relation to diagnosis of the contemporary critical movement. If the critique is 'locked in', 'internalized', 'confined', 'imprisoned' or 'suppressed' within

this simple analytical approach, simply by emphasizing the fact that the critical dialectic relationship between subject and structure is suspended under our contemporary atomistic demands, then it actually means that the movement is a completely different one. The critique is not merely individualized, in the sense that any subject can aim their own individual critique at society's structural conditions, because this assumes that the critique goes from an inner to an outer circumstance.

The movement has become something else, at least in contemporary diagnostic assumptions – namely from a self to a self-appointed, distanced, other-self. The critique has become self-criticism, made a u-turn and been directed against itself. This movement has been produced because the structural dominance has changed from various collective demands which, with a certain coercive character, reprimanded the individual subject's will, into a common aim with new, individualized goals, but with the same coercive character. The movement becomes totalitarian because it leaves the impression that structural claims disappear with individualization (see also Dean for a similar observation, 2006[1999]: 242).

In this way, phenomena which previously were social movements and the objects of criticism of the humanities and the social sciences suddenly become invisible. The outer relationships of dominance disappear when the dominance changes from an external to an internalized relationship of dominance.

In other words, what once were visible, collective, critical demands have now become individual demands. The totalitarian trait is revealed more precisely in the fact that the possibility of criticism of external conditions disappears in parallel with the subjects' internalization of the idea of complete solipsistic freedom – the possibility of critique of the outer conditions disappears. Critique has become an internal affair.

The ideological march order has become 'secularized' and requires no extraordinary, visible, outer controlling authorities to correct or reprimand those subjects that fall outside the individualization process, inasmuch as the object of critique has apparently disappeared. These shifts of movement furthermore lead to structural responsibility being shifted to the subject. The subjective crises which could previously be detected and traced back to society's structural conditions with the help of an externally-oriented critique are now no longer visible, since the critique has become introverted, and the crises therefore remain within the subject's own experience-based framework.

In other words, what could previously be described as a structural responsibility has now become individualized, and the subject has been made responsible for his own personal 'crises', even though these crises are in principle structurally contingent. The transfer of structural responsibility for the subjects to the subjects themselves entails that the 'relief' that the individual crisis necessarily demands has now become a 'burden', with the responsibility placed solely upon the subject.

(II) Anthropological Mutability – the Movement Repertoire of Critique

The contemporary governmental telos takes the form of a neo-liberalism which attempts to foster an entrepreneur-type homo economicus, regarded as a manipulable subject that will initiate and develop its relationship with itself. The subject 'must invest in its human

capital to achieve economic earnings as well as mental and cultural forms of satisfaction' (Dean, 2006[1999]: 110). Those subjects who do not currently understand how to realize their inner ambitions are regarded as being unable to liberate themselves from their biographical circumstances.

The ideological 'trick' lies in the fact that it is precisely this apparent 'emancipation' which is the actual relationship of dominance. For each 'emancipatory step', subjects are diverted from the necessary teleological horizon where they are able to set future targets with retrospective content, and hereby maintain a self-practical relationship. Our contemporary ideological processing thus consists of a pathological demand that forces the individual to surrender its historicity, whereby it can be transformed into a manipulable object – a yielding material which is converted into an object for the degree of capital debt, i.e. the amount of the self's resources that can be attributed to creditors. It is not therefore surprising that the ideology of the self's resources collapses with its original etymological definition, in that 'realization' means 'to convert to a money medium'.

The word 'realization' has its origins in the Latin *res*, meaning 'thing' or 'affair', and deals with the conversion of property to money (Salamon, 2006: 140). However, it is not a material possession which is realized here, but the self (hence self-realization). The subject who invests in the self thereby makes it profitable, places the self on a level with contemporary demand curves, and can view the self in accordance with the formula of capitalism, i.e. the transformation of non-capital to capital (Salamon, 2006: 144).

The ideological success is thus the process whereby ineffective exploitation of the individualized self becomes an actualized circumstance for the subject's self-practical relationship. Those aspects which previously appeared to be liabilities under more stable, habitually-embedded, unreflected practices, now become assets which potentially and introspectively can be observed and later distributed in the recruiting industry's categories for resource allocation. The radical ideological shift does not consist here in the capitalistic formula for success, which apparently has changed neither its denominator nor numerator, but in the control of the subject. The outer control of the subject's hypoaesthesia, a condition whereby the body becomes much less sensitive than usual to stimulation, is replaced by an inner control in which the subjects' potentials are processed with the help of self-technologies.

It is through this shift, by which outer normative coercion is turned into an inner affair, that the range of movements of critique radically changes character, as with this movement the self must split into an empirical self which possesses the biographical, accumulated, empirical phenomena that constitute the subject per se, and a demand-filled subject which possesses contemporary ideological imperatives. The self that is determined by the embedding of habitual practice can, more precisely, although in general terms, be defined as one that is embedded in the subject's 'normal' bodily and mental state, or as one that acts without restrictions in accordance with its 'true' nature. The subject which, on the other hand, is subordinate to the ideological imperatives is the self which appears critical, and which is 'beside' or 'outside' itself (Walzer, 2002: 86). When the self criticizes itself using the ideologically programmed self, it takes a reflexive step and uses critique as a regulating weapon, as a critical inspector of the unproductive nature of its habits (Walzer, 2002: 86).

With precise, ideological, seismographic critique, the self's undiscovered potentials are corrected, reprimanded and rebuked. A self-proclaimed inner tribunal is orchestrated, in which the subject must split the self into a number of functionally divided and specific roles: as spokesman for the defence of the self which is contingent upon the repeat behaviour of standard practice; as plaintiff, with the accusations of the ideological, background values; and as a judge on the day of reckoning, who upholds the necessary and proper sanctions or gratifications.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the entire modern catalogue of illnesses is in accord with the destructive behaviour of this self-critique. The anorexic, the depressive, and those suffering from stress, anxiety or panic are all characterized by extremely negative self-criticism and an unbearable weariness of being themselves. The externalized, critical self which works flat out in the overheated ideological courtroom ultimately wears the self out.

Consequently, it is not strange that yet another etymological agreement arises at the end of this brief causalistic presentation; for not only are the resources of the self consumed like fossil fuels to be utilized in the capitalistic production phase, but the critically divided self also drives the subject's resources, with the power characteristic of all machinery, to the definition level where it collapses with the now medically accepted expression, 'burnt out'. The consequence is that the individual stands alone with normative demands but without the inter-subjective experiences that can contribute to producing an extrovert critique of society's pathological condition. With these brief observations on critique's imprisoned contemporary condition, it is time to return to the invariant characteristics of critique.

(III) The Immutability of Critique

At first glance, the concept of 'critique' appears merely formal in character, and seemingly empty of substantial content. It is not known who or what has caused the critique, just as it is not evident in which direction the critique is moving, nor who is the critical subject or object of the critique. Despite the critique's seemingly formal character, and thus its apparent dependence on normative background values, we can, merely by summoning a few embedded everyday phenomena from our common social space, discern the critique's own independent, normative core.

At a structural level, the society that is receptive to so-called social criticism is an open society which, in line with the democratic ideal, is capable of achieving just progress. On a subject level, those who are open to so-called 'constructive criticism' of their flaws or defects are open subjects who, in line with the enlightenment ideal, are capable of achieving cognitive progress. Behind what are, in a positive sense, general doctrines which are familiar to all the children of modernity lies the common conviction that a society which offers criticism an opportunity to flourish is a just society. Conversely, a society that suppresses criticism is regarded as an unjust or even a pathological society.

These everyday doctrines already point in the direction of a weak concept of justice with regard to the individual release of critique, by allowing anyone to put forward their criticisms in the public sphere. But this claim of justice cannot on its own support a future

critical theory which will do more than merely put forward an abstract, universalistic foundation to ensure the continuing emancipation of the critique; one critical argument can be as good as another. On the contrary, an important empirical point of impact is the reservoir of cultural expressions for critique, whether verbal or physical, that does not reach the public sphere.

An alternative way to pose the question of justice is by means of a negative methodology in which the sociological work is concentrated in those areas of social reality where critique does not come to public debate. In this indirect fashion, it is those instances in which critique is merely instrumental in character – in other words, where critique is used merely as a creative means of renewing goods and services, or as a strategic weapon against the market's competitors, or, as we have seen, as an ideological means of controlling the subjects' effectuation of inner potential.

The assumption is speculative, and attempts nothing more than to attain the level of what Karl Popper (2002) has described as a way towards a less bad society; or Paul Ricoeur's (1998) intuition that our experience of justice is mediated through our experiences of injustice, or Avishia Margalit's (1998) attempt to describe a decent society rather than a just one.

The advantage of emphasizing critique as such an embedded quasi-anthropological immanence is that, since it can be regarded as an indispensable human condition, it may reasonably be assumed that in those cases where critique is not expressed, it is because of the obstructions of certain individuals or of society to the development of the critical 'impulse' or 'ability'. If we add to this some of critique's normative core elements, namely that it functions as perhaps the ultimate means of emancipation from dominating circumstances, and as one of the strongest cognitive instruments for the production of knowledge, we may furthermore form a reasonable suspicion that certain societal development tendencies have led to dominance relationships in which critique is suppressed.

The concept of critique apparently seems to possess the character trait that, as facticity, it is the possessor of unresolved demands. Here it is not only the unresolved demands for recognition, tolerance or respect, but also the possibility of being able to engage in critique, that act as autonomous values. For each posed critique that remains unresolved, or remains undiscovered among the hegemonic public, the sociologist must act as an auxiliary instrument for the suppressed, transcendent dimension in the immanence. This normative surplus, this opportunity for materialization, that offers itself in the form of potential operational goals can present a clearer potential for the moral development of a society that aims to characterize itself as just.

As we have seen, there are already certain characteristics which mean that the concept of critique can categorically withstand being subjected to the kind of quasi-anthropological thinking that investigates the immutable pre-conditions for the malleability of human beings. It is now clearer that every subject possesses a form of natural critical ability which may be regarded as an unchangeable precondition for human existence. But it is also just as clear that the movement repertoire of critique is uncontrollable, and does not necessarily serve all of society's social segments. If the concept of critique's ahistorical element is thus to be democratized, it must mean that anyone, independent of status, age, gender, ethnic affiliation or sexual orientation, will be unhindered in expressing criticism of society's

development. The manner in which this can be achieved, and the prerequisites which must be formulated as the minimum conditions under which any given subject, free of fear and powerlessness, will be capable, unhindered, of breaking through society's ideological demands, is however as yet unclear.

(IV) Ways to the Suppressed Transcendent Dimension in the Immanence

Following these initial general guides, upon the assumptions of which the research programme rests, it is also possible to present a number of immediate tasks, both theoretical and empirical. Allow me to begin with theory. Today, a theoretical line already exists from Michel Foucault's deliberations on the epistemological status of the concept of critique (1997, 2001) to Judith Butler's first observations on the concept's normative value (2002) and Luc Boltanski's sociology of critique (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]). However, these not insignificant reflections have not yet been given any common theoretical denominator; there is as yet no central corpus of theory in which elements of social co-existence can be explained in a social theoretical manner with the aid of a more subtle concept of critique. Such theoretical reconstructions cannot stand alone; it is imperative that theoretical considerations are empirically informed with the help of a negative methodology in which the population's critical vocabulary is examined. Unlike a methodology that relies on descriptions or positiva, i.e. one that attempts to respectively account for society's conditions as neutrally as possible according to positivistic directions, or one that seeks out society's positive developmental tendencies with the aim of supporting these characteristics in the name of action research, the perspective outlined here will concentrate exclusively on moving by phenomenologically negative means into the social immanence, in order to acquire an analytical and empirical grasp of the experiences which fail to gain access to social movements or other kinds of will formation.

This requires a thorough empirical mapping of the ways in which the dominant society benefits from the added value that the critical silence provides. What are the conscious or subconscious structural mechanisms for oppression that exist in our society, and in what respects are they linked to society's ideological demands? These studies, however, say nothing about how those who are subject to the controlling techniques project their critical impulses, such as the stigmatized and isolated subjects who avoid public attention, or the poorly-paid night shift workers whose reactions are not expressed during democracy's opening hours, or the elderly people in residential homes who wet their beds to protest against the lack of subjective contact. These empirical examples also illustrate how the new yardstick for sociological contemporary diagnosis must be constructed: the field of tension arises between the actual opportunities for critique and that which is transcended, formulated as a series of minimum prerequisites for any subject. Here the question is whether it is possible to penetrate to this strongly controlled reservoir of suppressed critique.

The task of sociology, once again, is to act as a medium, or rather a megaphone, for the socially excluded, who are unable to articulate their critique in a conventional manner. In extension of this, it must be demonstrated that the suppressed critique should not

merely be perceived as a lack of interest in the condition of society among those at its lower levels, but on the contrary, a consequence of the inability of the established society to interpret certain expressions as critical.

Notes

1   For a further elaboration and clarification on the anthropological line of thought, see Honneth and Joas (1988 [1980]).
2   On the relationship between immanence and transcendence, see Callinicos (2006).

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For correspondence: Rasmus Willig, Department for Social Research, University of Roskilde, Universitetsvej 1, byg 25.3, 4000, Roskilde, Denmark. Email: willig@ruc.dk